

Red *hots*

TAKE A BITE AND FEEL THE BURN. Pungent chilies make our eyes water and our mouths blister, but we love them.

Now that fall approaches, many peppers are ready to harvest. Mike Bartolo, a vegetable crop specialist for Colorado State University (CSU), recommends watching for a color change so you'll know when to pick. Jalapeños, for example, are ready when they're green, but wait for other peppers to turn red or yellow, depending on the species.

"When they're mature," Bartolo says, "peppers stop expanding in size and become firm. They lose their sheen and get thicker." If you like a sweeter flavor, let your peppers turn red before you pull or cut them from the plants.

Once you've got a lovely peck or two of peppers, you can preserve them in a variety of ways. Marisa Bunning, a Food Safety Specialist at CSU, is a fan of freezing peppers. "Freezing is fast and convenient, and you can do small batches, which fits busy lifestyles."

Bunning warns against using old family recipes to preserve the fruits, especially those that call for canning or marinating peppers in oil. Improper techniques can lead to food poisoning. For safety's sake, Bunning recommends following the instructions in the popular Ball® brand canning guides, or in the *So Easy To Preserve* books and videos produced by The University of Georgia Cooperative Extension.

When you're ready to "put up" your peppers, begin with fresh, crisp, blemish-free fruits. Wear gloves and glasses to protect yourself from capsaicin oil, which can cause serious burns. Then try one of these methods to save your hot stuff:

■ **Roasting.** Heat peppers in the microwave, over a flame or in the oven (see "Oven-Roasting Peppers," facing page) until their skins blister. If microwaving, use a microwave-safe container or bag that allows steam to escape. Cool peppers, then peel. Freeze or refrigerate, but if the latter, use within 3 days.

■ **Freezing.** Wash peppers, remove stems and seeds, and cut into strips or rings. Freeze in a single layer on a cookie sheet. Store in freezer bags at 0°F or below.

■ **Canning, bottling and pickling.** Non-acid foods like chilies must be processed under pressure. Use only research-tested recipes and methods, such as those in the resources listed on our website.

■ **Smoking.** Paul Hinrichs is a cooking enthusiast from Georgia who smokes his peppers over hickory or oak. "Slit the peppers, so the insides can dry out. Some people brine them first by soaking them in salt water," he says. Use a clean grill or smoker and low, even heating. Jalapeños make delicious chipotles.

■ **Dehydrating.** Follow manufacturer's instructions.

■ **Air-drying.** String Anaschaps or other chilies on cotton twine and hang in an area with good air circulation until you're ready to use them. **FL**



When to pick and how to pack your chilies.

BY LYNN COULTER

resources listed on our website.

my **FarmLIFE**.com

For resources on how to prepare chilies, as well as how to buy seeds and plants, see go.myfarmlife.com/redhots. We also offer a list of the fall's hottest chili festivals.

