

Charleston Hot Sizzles to Market

The Charleston Hot pepper that U.S. Department of Agriculture scientists bred in that South Carolina city hit the news pages in early 1993. More than 28,000 seed requests later, the pepper is now being sold in at least 8 seed catalogs and is the main ingredient in 2 new hot sauces.

The 2-year trek from laboratory to the marketplace is something of a record for a vegetable variety released by USDA's Agricultural Research Service at Charleston. The cayenne pepper sped to market faster than researchers ever imagined—overwhelming the agency's U.S. Vegetable Laboratory with seed requests from around the world.

"Charleston Hot was a record breaker from the beginning," says Philip Dukes, a retired plant pathologist at Charleston. "We've never had this kind of response to any vegetable we've released. Often it takes years for a new variety to catch on. Interest in Charleston Hot seemed to explode almost overnight."

Dukes and geneticist Richard L. Fery at the Charleston lab bred the Charleston Hot. Fery noted that Charleston Hot and its sister pepper, Carolina Cayenne, have become a hit in more ways than one. He says breeders worldwide are also using the peppers as sources of resistance against root knot nematodes.

At the dinner table, Charleston Hot peppers are the main ingredient in Holy City Heat, a sauce made by Atlantis Coastal Foods, based in Charleston. The company produced a few thousand bottles of the sauce during 1994 and expects to boost production in 1995 because of the sauce's popularity, a spokesman says.

Holy City Heat is also being marketed for retail sale through the Mo-Hotta Mo-Betta catalog, which says of the sauce, "Beautifully packaged in an old-fashioned elixir

bottle, it's sure to be the cure for what ails you!"

Also, the Three Amigos restaurant chain is marketing a hot sauce under the name Charleston Hell Hot Sauce, also made from Charleston Hot.

Dukes and Fery attribute the pepper's popularity to its spicy taste, high yields, resistance to southern root knot nematodes, and compact plant size for home gardens.

What other new peppers are in store from Charleston? Fery says he expects to release next year a new line of bell peppers that are resistant to root knot nematodes. "Genetic resistance is important because the fumigant methyl bromide, used to control these nematodes, is being phased out."

Fery and agency plant pathologist Judy Thies at Charleston have begun work to breed habanero peppers with root knot nematode resistance. Habaneros are the hottest cultivated peppers—several times hotter than cayenne—and are increasingly popular in the United States. But Fery says a new nematode-resistant habanero is probably at least several years away.

Dukes and Fery reiterate that the Charleston lab no longer fills requests for Charleston Hot seed. People interested in obtaining seed should contact seed companies directly.—By Sean Adams, ARS.

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SCOTT BAUER



Charleston Hot peppers. (K6050-1)

Where To Get 'em Hot

Nine outlets that currently sell Charleston Hot seed are:

- DeGiorgi Seed Company, Omaha, NE [1-800-858-2580]
- Jones Deade, P.O. Box 21557, Charleston, SC 29413
- Pepper Joe's, Inc., 1650 Pembroke Rd., Norristown, PA 19403
- Pepper Gal, P.O. Box 23006, Fort Lauderdale, FL 33307
- R.H. Shumway's, Graniteville, SC [1-800-322-7288]
- R.H. Shumway's Totally Tomatoes, P.O. Box 1626, Augusta, GA 30903
- Rupp's Seed Co., 17919 County Rd., Wauseon, OH 43587
- South Carolina Foundation Seed Association, Box 349952, Clemson, SC 29634
- Nanjemoy Flower and Herb Farm, Nanjemoy, MD [1-800-217-4343]