

6/21/2008 Black Pepper Some Like It Hot! - TROPICAL DOME

Black pepper (*Piper nigrum*) originated in Southern India. It has been cultivated there for millennia and is now grown in many tropical areas. Columbus sailed across the Atlantic in hopes of finding a faster route to spice sources. Black pepper was one of them. In fact, it is the one spice that most people have on their tables in shakers along with salt, although freshly ground peppercorns have a stronger flavor.

People use spices such as pepper to enhance the flavor of foods, to mask bad flavors such as rotten meat, and possibly to help reduce bacterial contamination. The spice plants themselves probably have their own reasons for producing the pungent chemicals. These chemicals might deter animals from eating them, although this defense fails when humans develop a taste for the essential oils and alkaloids found in spices.

Black pepper is a perennial, tropical vine. The leaves have smooth edges and are produced on alternate sides of the stem. Spikes of small flowers are produced that grow to 6-8 inches. Each flower produces a fruit called a drupe containing a hard pit or stone containing a single seed. Long spikes of fruit hang down between the leaves. Although the common name of the plant is "black" pepper, the color of the fruit or peppercorns depends on how people prepare them. Black pepper is produced from green, unripe fruit that are washed in hot water and allowed to dry. The fruit turn black and shrink around the pit. If you look closely at a whole peppercorn, you can see the shrunken fruit skin on the surface. Green pepper also is made from unripe fruit and is used fresh, dried, or pickled. White pepper is usually just the pit with the ripe fruit removed. Black pepper and white pepper have about the same flavor and both are ground for use in foods. Black pepper has a stronger flavor, but white pepper is used in white sauces to avoid the specks of black pepper.

Chili peppers and their relative the bell pepper are in the genus *Capsicum* and belong to the same family as potatoes, eggplant, and tobacco. Chilies originated in the Americas and now are widely used to add hot flavor to foods. These New World peppers are common in Wisconsin gardens. You can see the Old World black pepper, *Piper nigrum*, growing in the Tropical Dome.

