

TINY TERROR

Fiery chile pequín is the state's only native pepper.

In the fall, as soon as hints of red tinge tiny chile pequíns, the race is on.

If you want some, you have to be vigilant and check the bushes every day. When the peppers turn red, birds gobble them up. I remember glancing out the court yard window one morning when I was heading off to my town job. The three or four chile petins bushes were covered in eastern blue birds. There must have been a dozen and they were right outside the window. It was mighty hard for me to leave that behind and go out the opposite door to work. The birds stayed three days until every red orb was stripped from the bushes. What a delight.

When chewed, pequíns burn. The searing sensation stems from a chemical compound called capsaicin that's found within the pod's ribs and seeds. Since many birds have weak senses of smell and taste, they can gulp down pequíns with no ill effects.

Human tongues, however, are far more sensitive, so just one or two peppers can amply spice an entire pot of chili or stew. A friend of mine from Llano taught me to eat them while still green. They have a great flavor all their own. Once I garnished a dish with them when our neighbor was down for lunch. He popped a couple in his mouth thinking they were green peas. He very soon discovered they were not. Unlike Mr. Blue Bird, Mr. Byrd felt the heat.

Chile pequíns can be kept in a little bottle with vinegar and used on everything from chili to beans or eggs. The red ones can be dried and ground like crushed red pepper. After frost, the leaves mostly fall off leaving the red peppers decorating the branches. I have a bouquet of them still on the kitchen table I used for Christmas decoration. If you need to add a little spice to your life, you can just pinch one off and sprinkle it over your plate.

Capsicum annuum — also called bird pepper — occurs in South, Central and East Texas as either an annual or perennial. Bushes typically grow under fences or trees (thanks to birds) and can reach 3 to 5 feet high. They're happy in shade or sun.

Their small, white flowers bloom in the summer or early fall and produce pea-size green berries that turn bright red when ripe.

Depending on locale, other common names for the fiery fruit include chile petín, chilipiquín and chile tepin. In 1997, the Texas Legislature declared the “chiltepin pepper” as the official state native pepper. Chile pequíns are the state’s only native pepper.

Go outside & play!