

The Chili Woman

—Rebecca Hill

For over 28 years, Susan Welsand has been farming chili peppers on her quarter of an acre farm in southern Indiana under the guise of the “Chili Woman.” She started gardening with her grandfather as a young girl, and then continued growing vegetables in her small

postage-stamp yard in Bloomington, Indiana. Now she runs two greenhouses full of chili peppers, selling her plants and dried chili products online and at her local farming cooperative.

While most people would call it a vegetable, the chili pepper is a fruit of plants from the genus *Capsicum*. Though it goes by a variety of names like chile to chilli to aji to rocoto, it has five domesticated species (*C. annuum*, *C. frutescens*, *C. chinense*, *C. baccatum*, and *C. pubescens*). However, there are over 3000 varieties of peppers. In 2014, a team of researchers from the University of California Davis found that central-east Mexico was the birthplace of the domesticated chili pepper. However, it has been part of the human diet since BC.

History shows that Native Americans started growing chili plants between 5200 and 3400 BC, making it the oldest cultivated crop in the Americas. According to the FDA, the United States now ranks fifth in the global production of green peppers, although China produces the largest number of green peppers globally.

Chili pepper production has increased exponentially across the globe, with 2 to 4.5 million tons of dry types and from 17 to 36 million tons of fresh peppers. Currently, Welsand grows over 2100 varieties and maintains a seed bank on her farm. From the African Birdseye pepper a small carrot-shaped scarlet pepper, to the Carmine pepper, an elongated golden, but wrinkly habanero, Welsand’s peppers range from hot and spicy to fruity. Her favorite is the Bolivian Gusano pepper, a pepper that originated from Aribibi, Bolivia, and is also known as the Caterpillar Chilli pepper. Though it is a hot pepper, it has a strong citrus flavor and is a pepper that she’d chosen over any super-hot chili today.



As for the number of varieties she has, often a story exists behind how she acquired the seeds that she’s accumulated. Over the years, Welsand has developed what she calls a vast number of “odd connections.” Bloomington is the home of Indiana

University, a culturally and ethnically diverse university town. Through her chili peppers, Welsand has met people from all over the globe. “I have a customer who is a research engineer and is now retired,” said Welsand. “He worked for Exxon and has brought me seeds from Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, and other places.” She also has a friend who is a deep-sea diver in the Caribbean, the home of her many Caribbean chili pepper seeds like the Scotch Bonnet Red, a pepper found in hot Caribbean dishes like jerk chicken. She has received seeds from an agricultural researcher-friend who researched remote areas of China and a yam researcher who spent time in Thailand, Laos, and Vietnam.

Early on in her career as an amateur ethnobotanist, Welsand was something of an anomaly. Chili peppers were popular, but most folks weren’t aware of the vast number of flavor profiles like they are today. Now, according to Welsand, chili peppers are mainstream. Cooking shows showcase recipes with chili peppers and food magazines feature chili peppers. “I didn’t expect chilis to become as popular as they are now,” said Welsand. Now people ask her for specific peppers or flavor profiles. With Welsand’s diverse seed catalog and her varied palate, she finds that she can meet almost any request no matter how exotic.

Often Welsand finds that customers from other countries seek her out for a pepper that reminds them of home. One of her customers, a woman from Brazil, wanted a Quintisho pepper, a native Bolivian pepper that resembles a cherry tomato. Another customer, a Nigerian who was studying for his Ph.D. at IU, once visited her market booth. “I had a basket of Ata Ijosi peppers, and he stood looking at them with a

dumbfounded look on his face,” said Welsand. It turns out the Ata Ijosi were native to his hometown in Nigeria. He was so excited, says Welsand, and planned to bring his mother when she visited. “He wanted to show her that the ‘Midwest was not bland,’” laughed Welsand.

In the beginning, Welsand’s customer base consisted mainly of restaurant chefs looking for chilis for cooking. But now her customer base has diversified to include not only chefs but also home growers and those who grow for farmers’ markets.

Right now, Welsand is transplanting chili plants from her quarter of an acre farm, moving them out of her germination greenhouse to her larger greenhouse. In May, she will start shipping her plants. Her farm is fully sustainable, using solar power to power the greenhouses.

That solar-powered greenhouse is a result of a May 25, 2011, tornado that struck southern Indiana. Welsand lost her electricity, parts of her greenhouse, and hundreds of plants to the tornado. Because the tornado destroyed a canopy of trees that shaded her property, Welsand was able to install 5.2-kilowatt solar panels mounted on two free-standing posts on a concrete slab. Currently, she generates more electricity than she uses and so sells the remainder back to Ohio.

The May shipping season is intense. As a result, she plants her peppers much later than most growers do. “Chili peppers like warm soil,” said Welsand. “Planting them when the ground is cold stunts their growth.” So Welsand waits until the soil is more temperate.

To do this, she relies on an unconventional method for figuring out when the soil is warm. “I have a snapping turtle near my pond, and she comes up from the hill to the pond to lay her eggs every year,” said Welsand. “When she does this, I know it is time to plant.”

But planting season, over the years, has shifted by several weeks. “I used to see her the third week of May,” said Welsand. “Then I saw her Memorial Day weekend.” Now Welsand doesn’t see her until the first week of June. So, she plants that first week of June. Harvest depends on the variety of chili pepper with some types of poblanos and jalapenos coming on quickly. Other peppers like habaneros have a longer growing season.

With the COVID-19 pandemic, Welsand wonders what will happen to her as a small business even though it is considered essential. Welsand, however, has decided that she will not open her greenhouse this year. “Having people come into the greenhouse to browse and touch everything is not in the interest of public safety.” Though Welsand still has online ordering and contactless delivery, the pandemic is a significant financial blow for Welsand and her operation. “I will be in the same boat as every other small businessperson,” said Welsand. “But I weathered a tornado. I’ll weather this.” 🐢

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