

The spice that is present in every kitchen

Author(s): проф. д-р Стойка Машева, ИЗК "Марица" Пловдив; проф. д-р Винелина Янкова, ИЗК "Марица" в Пловдив

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Pepper is a major vegetable crop valued for its good nutritional, dietary and taste qualities. These are determined by its content of sugars, acids, mineral salts, vitamins and pectic substances. It has been established that the red fruits of pepper contain from 300 to 450 mg of rutin, which has vitamin P activity and is particularly effective in cases of high blood pressure and for the healing of wounds.

Pepper belongs to the family Solanaceae (*Solanaceae*). Under our climatic conditions it is an annual plant, whereas in the countries of the tropical regions it develops as a perennial species. It is classified as a thermophilic vegetable crop. The best predecessors for it are vegetables from the family Fabaceae (*Fabaceae*) and the family Cucurbitaceae (*Cucurbitaceae*). Pepper does not tolerate being grown after itself, nor after

tomato and eggplant, crops from the same family. In our country the following production directions have been established: **early field production of pepper, medium-early field production of pepper and production of red pepper for grinding.**

There is hardly any vegetable that appears so often on our table as pepper. The ways in which it can be prepared are many and diverse, so that it can be present in our menu almost year-round. It is consumed in all forms – from fresh through canned and frozen to dried and finely ground into powder.

There are dozens of cultivars with different colours, sizes and shapes. Some are grown solely for ornamental purposes and we often see them in flower shops. All are initially green, but only some of them retain this colour after ripening. The rest change and become yellow, white, orange, red, purple. There are cultivars intended specifically for red pepper for grinding.

Red pepper is one of the most beloved and widely used *spices in Bulgarian cuisine*. Many people consider it to be just an ordinary culinary spice, but it turns out to be incredibly beneficial to health. It helps in the fight against colds, overweight, high cholesterol and triglycerides, high blood sugar, anaemia and others. In our country there is hardly any dish or *traditional stew* to which red pepper is not added. Characteristic of the taste imparted by this spice is its slightly sweet nuance, which makes it extremely suitable for seasoning vegetable dishes, chicken, pork and beef, and even fish. In recent years smoked red pepper has become very popular, imparting a unique taste to dishes.

Not many details are known about the history of the spice, but **sweet red pepper** was the first to come into use. In Europe red pepper was not brought from the Orient, but from Portugal. In the country of oranges and fine wine red pepper arrived in the 16th century, when Portuguese caravels brought the spice from Mexico. Its taste qualities were immediately highly appreciated, and it was an extremely expensive spice, reaching the price of black pepper. Later the Hungarian scientist Albert Szent-Györgyi, when analysing ground red pepper, found a high content of vitamin C in it. This discovery earned him the Nobel Prize in 1937.

There are special cultivars used for the production of red pepper for grinding. They are characterised by a thinner pericarp, which dries easily. They have a higher content of colouring substances, which are measured in ASTA units. The Bulgarian State Standard provides for five quality grades of red pepper. The objective of the breeding programmes at the Maritsa Vegetable Crops Research Institute in Plovdiv is to create cultivars of red pepper for grinding with a pigment content of over 200 ASTA units and to preserve them during storage under warehouse conditions for up to one year. It combines well with basil, ginger, oregano, cinnamon, black pepper, cumin, garlic and onion.

A wide assortment of spices is used in modern cookery. These may be piquant mixtures, individual products or their parts, prepared for use. There are bright spices. There are hot spices. There are food additives that combine richness of flavour, a piquant sensation and many beneficial properties. Ground red pepper can be classified precisely among such spices. It is called the “god of fire” and “red gold”, and participates in numerous recipes – soups, sauces, vegetable and meat dishes.

Red pepper is a spice in the form of powder or small flakes obtained by grinding or crushing dried red peppers. Along with the most traditional flavourings – salt and sugar, it is the most widespread spice in cookery worldwide. It imparts to dishes its characteristic slightly sweet aroma, which is fully released during heat treatment. This should be short and moderate, because at high temperature the sugars in it burn and its taste becomes bitter.

Red pepper is of two types according to its taste – hot and sweet.

Hot red pepper (chilli, cayenne) is prepared from ripe hot peppers and is used to make dishes and sauces spicy. **Hot peppers contain the alkaloid capsaicin.** It is a powerful natural compound that affects genes related to blood sugar levels and blocks the enzymes that break it down. It can improve insulin tolerance. It has been proven to help prevent malignant formations, heart attacks, ulcers and other gastrointestinal diseases.

Sweet red pepper is obtained from sweet red peppers and imparts a slightly sweet taste to dishes. It is one of the most widespread spices. It colours dishes in a pleasant orange to terracotta-red colour. Sometimes it is used for sprinkling various products, but then its aroma is not fully released and the effect achieved is more aesthetic than gustatory.

The traditional Bulgarian understanding of red pepper is somewhat more complex and depends on the method of its preparation. What we now call sweet red pepper used to be called by the old Bulgarians “mild” pepper. It is necessarily finely ground into powder. Mild pepper was traditionally used mainly for sprinkling on ritual bread, bread, cheese, salads. Nowadays the so-called “sweet” pepper is most often used.

Hot ground pepper is divided into three types:

- **mildly hot red** – a mixture of mild with hot, also ground into powder. In the past this was the traditional red pepper of Bulgarians, used for flavouring foods;
- **hot red** – it may be ground into powder or crushed (ground into coarser flakes). This type is considered analogous to North American cayenne.

- **very hot red** – almost always only crushed, and not finely ground. The strongly hot type is considered analogous to Mexican and South American chilli.

The benefits of red pepper for the human body are many. Hot red pepper is an excellent source of vitamin A. It is also a good source of vitamin B6, vitamin C, vitamin K, manganese and dietary fibre. Hot red pepper enhances metabolic processes and accelerates the expulsion of mucus. It is known that capsaicin, which determines the hot taste, is a powerful analgesic and helps strengthen the immune system.

Pepper has the property of providing additional warmth to the body, improving blood circulation and facilitating its delivery to more distant areas of the body. As it is very rich in fibre and beneficial minerals, it is a suitable spice for all kinds of weight-loss diets.

During colds and flu the body has an increased need for **vitamin C**, and red pepper is an excellent way to supply this valuable antioxidant. According to Dr Serhat Koran from Medipol University Hospital, 1 g of ground red pepper contains more vitamin C than the juice of 4 lemons. It is beneficial during illness because it has good appetite-stimulating properties. Loss of appetite is a major problem during illness, as the body needs to obtain important nutrients that help it cope with the problem more quickly.

The high content of **carotenoids in red pepper**, such as vitamin A and zeaxanthin, determines the beneficial effect of the spice on eye health. It is known that vitamin A protects against macular blindness and macular degeneration, while zeaxanthin in turn reduces the risk of eye infections, but also protects against various infectious diseases and certain respiratory problems.

It is believed that red pepper can improve sleep quality. This is due to the vitamin B6 it contains, which stimulates the production of the hormone melatonin, responsible for maintaining a healthy sleep cycle.

Another health benefit attributed to red pepper is the reduction of superficial varicose veins. It also helps deliver more oxygen to the hair follicles, thereby stimulating hair growth and at the same time strengthening it, preventing hair loss.

Sweet red pepper improves digestion by increasing the secretion of saliva and gastric acids, which in turn break down food more quickly and help for the faster provision of nutrients needed for the body's energy.

There are many benefits from the regular consumption of red pepper, so do not miss the opportunity to season your dishes with it. Choose a high-quality product in order to benefit to the maximum from its culinary and health advantages.

However, excessive consumption of spicy foods may lead to ulcer and gastritis, so be careful with the use of hot red pepper.