

Plant of the month: *Capsicum annuum* L.

Class: Dicotyledonae

Order: Solanales

Subclass: Asteridae

Family: Solanaceae

Common Name: chilli pepper, chillies, capsicum, pepper

Flowering time (N.Z.): spring – summer

Fruiting time (N.Z.): summer – autumn

Flowers: inconspicuous and white

Fruit: a many-seeded berry, green, yellow, orange, purple or red

NZ status: introduced and cultivated

Origin: Tropical America

There are 10 species in the *Capsicum* genus. Four are widely cultivated in Tropical America and two, *Capsicum annuum* L. and *C. frutescens* L., are cultivated throughout the world. The capsicum (*Capsicum annuum*) has been cultivated in Central and South America since at least 7000 BC. It was introduced to Europe by Columbus who brought it back from his first voyage in 1492 AD. It then spread through Africa and Asia.

Paprika is a finely-ground powder made from the dried fruits of *Capsicum annuum*. *Capsicum frutescens* is known to many cooks as both cayenne pepper (the whole fruit including seeds and placenta finely ground to a hot powder) and Tabasco sauce (the fruit pulp pickled in brine or vinegar). Chillies are rich in Vitamin C, stimulate the appetite and cool people down, by making them sweat.

Many of our most common vegetables and fruits come from the Solanaceae family including *Lycopersicon esculentum* (tomato), *Solanum tuberosum* (potato), *S. melongena* (egg plant or aubergine), *S. muricatum* (pepino), *Cyphomandra betacea* (tamarillo or tree tomato) and *Physalis peruviana* (Cape gooseberry). Many species of the Solanaceae family yield medicinal or hallucinogenic alkaloids including *Nicotina tabacum* (tobacco), *Atropa belladonna* (belladonna) *Datura stramonium* (thorn-apple) and *Hyoscyamus niger* (henbane).