A GUIDE FOR FLORIDA FARMERS: SAVING PEPPER SEEDS

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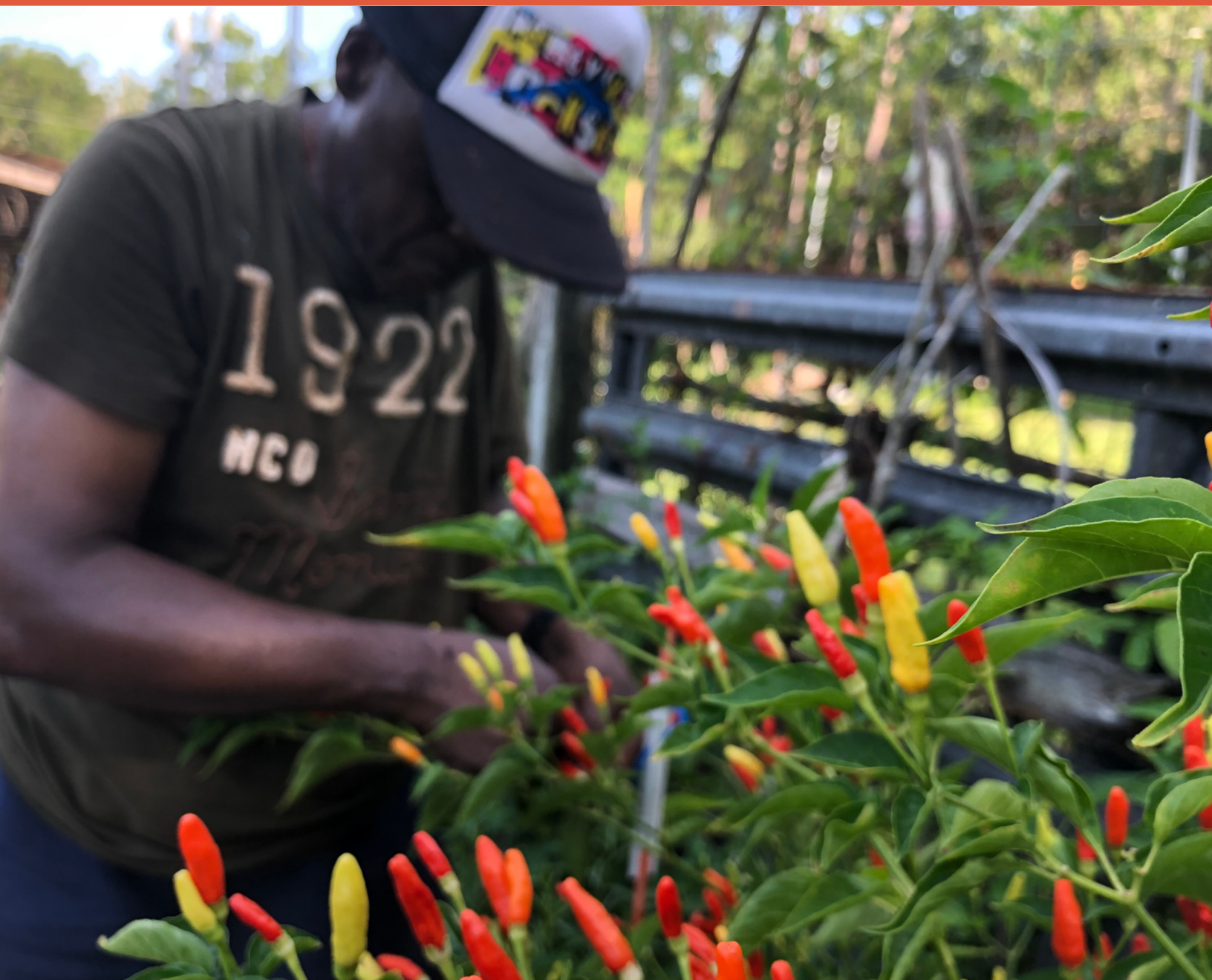


INTRODUCTION

This publication is for small-scale farmers who primarily sell produce to local markets and are interested in saving seeds for personal use or local distribution. The information provided is curated from the experiences of market farmers and small-scale seed growers in North Florida, where the growing climate is subtropical, characterized by a long warm and humid growing season, and a shorter, cooler season with occasional frosts. This publication specifically focuses on managing pepper crops for seed production, and assumes that farmers are already familiar with growing practices. A basic overview of seed saving tips for Florida growers is available (Davidson et al. 2024).

Sweet, hot, and spice peppers are commonly grown on Florida farms and saving seeds from these plants is relatively straightforward with a few additional considerations. Peppers generally grow well in Florida's subtropical and tropical conditions, and are among the top 5 most economically important crops in the state (Wade et al. 2024). Although perennial in this climate, most farmers treat them as annuals for a variety of reasons. Five different species of domesticated peppers (*Capsicum spp.*) are cultivated, and all but one have the potential to cross-pollinate amongst each other. This is the main challenge to saving seed for market farmers that grow many pepper varieties at the same time.

When pepper seeds are mature and viable, the fruits are also ready for market. Therefore, growing peppers for seed requires little additional effort for the grower. Good quality seeds remain viable for many years when stored properly, and a good season will yield plenty of seeds, so growers may only need to save seeds every few years depending on their goals.

GROWING PEPPERS TO BOTH SAVE SEED AND SELL FRUIT

The practices a grower uses to cultivate peppers for market are largely unaffected by the additional goal of saving seed. All the usual efforts involved in field preparation, cultivation, harvest, and post-harvest handling remain consistent. Peppers are generally a long season crop, needing at least 150 days from seed to seed. Although peppers originated in the warm climates of Central and South America, where day and night lengths are relatively equal, many modern varieties have been adapted and bred for cooler temperate climates with long summer days, which can pose challenges for Florida growers using these varieties. As with all crops, variety selection is important for success. Timing of plantings that has proven successful should be maintained, and will vary among growers from the northern panhandle to the more tropical southern parts of the state.

Of the 5 domesticated species in the genus *Capsicum* grown for their edible and/or ornamental fruits, 4 are capable of cross-pollinating with one another. Since farmers often grow multiple varieties for a bright and colorful market display, **considering the possibility for cross-pollination will be important.** When planning for how to incorporate pepper seed saving into the farm plan, also consider the goals for trait selection (i.e. fruit quality, flavor, disease resistance etc.), and the time needed to process seeds quickly after harvest to preserve their quality.

If the farmer is saving seed only for on-farm use or to share locally with other farmers, the effort required may be minimal. However, if seeds are intended for commercial sale or broader distribution, more considerations are needed to harvest and process higher volumes of seed, and to ensure that cross-pollination with other varieties does not occur. For farmers interested in learning about seed contracts with seed companies, expected seed yields, and other more commercial seed growing topics, detailed information is available in the publication by Dr. Mehmet Oztan, *Fundamentals of Commercial Seed Production in West Virginia.*

TYPES OF PEPPERS

Domesticated peppers are in the genus *Capsicum*, and include 5 different species. The "*Capsicum annuum* complex" includes: *C.annuum, C.frutescens, and C.chinense*. The other two species are *C. baccatum* and *C. pubescens*, with the latter not commonly grown and likely unsuitable for Florida climates. If any varieties among these different species are grown in proximity and their flowering time overlaps, there is a high probability that some will be cross-pollinated by bees. While this is **not an issue if peppers are being sold for food, it is a concern for seed saving** if the intention is to maintain pure varieties.

1. *Capsicum annuum* is the most widely grown species among gardeners and commercial farmers. Almost all large-fruited peppers belong to this species including sweet peppers, cayenne, paprika, and many hot chilis.

2. *Capsicum baccatum* is native to Bolivia and widely grown in South America. Often known as an "aji" pepper, these have wrinkled fruit, a distinctively fruity taste, strong aroma, and colorful appearance. The aji grouping can be misleading, as this word is commonly used throughout South America to refer to peppers in general, and not all varieties with "aji" in their name belong to this species.

3. *Capsicum frutescens* is native to the lowlands of the Amazon basin and thrives in hot climates. This species includes chili pepper types that often have softer fruit and are small, conical/ellipsoid-shaped. Some better known examples include Tabasco and squash peppers.

4. *Capsicum chinense* is also native to the Amazon and includes chili pepper types with unique flavors and in many cases, extreme heat. Some of the hottest peppers in the world belong to this species, including Habanero and Scotch Bonnet.

5. *Capsicum pubescens* is native to higher elevations of Mexico, Central America, and the Andes making it more adapted to cooler weather than other chile species. These are not commonly grown commercially and are the most distinctive of the 5 cultivated species with hairy leaves, purple flowers, and dark brown or black seed.

POLLINATION AND FRUIT DEVELOPMENT

Pepper plants are capable of both self-pollination and cross-pollination with other pepepr plants. The likelihood of cross-pollination varies widely from a 2-90% chance (Buttala and Siegel 2015), depending on environmental conditions, pollinator presence, each variety's unique flower structure, and most importantly - how close they are planted to one another. **It should be assumed that all pepper varieties, even if different species, can cross.**

Each pepper flower contains both female and male parts, but they tend to mature at different times of day within the same flower, favoring cross-pollination with other flowers or plants. Honeybees, bumblebees, and native bees are the main pollinators, and a healthy pollinator population supports increased pepper yields, as well as chances for cross-pollination between varieties. Compared to many other flowers, pepper flowers aren't especially attractive to bees (McCormack 2010), so planting more appealing flowers between varieties may help reduce any unwanted crossing.

Figure 1: A pepper flower up close. Pollen-laden anthers surround the stigma - the female reproductive organ that becomes the pepper. They can be self-pollinated but are also very attractive to insects and likely to be pollinated by them.

Farmers that are **saving seed to preserve a specific variety with desirable traits, should make plans to avoid unwanted crosses**. However, if varieties do cross, the result is usually a perfectly edible pepper—and the chance to save seed and develop a new variety (see Charley's story about an accidental hybrid in the next pages!).

Accidental crossings works well if sweet peppers cross with other sweet types or hot with hot—but if a sweet pepper crosses with a hot one, the result may be a spicy surprise customers weren't expecting! See the Resource section for more on on-farm plant breeding, a practice farmers have used for generations—long before formal plant breeding programs existed.

Peppers are considered moderate heat-loving plants, but night time lows and day time highs will affect fruiting and seed production. The impact of temperature will vary widely across the vast diversity of pepper varieties available, with sweet peppers tending to be more sensitive to high temperatures than hot chili types. Getting to know each unique variety and its optimal growing conditions is important. Florida farmers should be aware of the limitations of sweet peppers that may be day length and temperature sensitive, which can greatly affect fruit production and the season in which they are planted. Always start with a variety that is known to do well in this climate, or appears to have traits that are suitable.

ISOLATION DISTANCES

Although peppers are capable of self pollination, they are also receptive to insect pollination and thus it is recommended to separate different varieties grown at the same time to prevent cross-pollination. **It should be assumed that all pepper varieties can cross with one another, even if they are different species.** General guidelines suggest isolation distances between varieties of 300 - 1,600 feet. However, these are not strict rules. Many factors, such as local pollinator populations, other plants available for pollinators between the crops of interest, and physical barriers like forests or buildings, can influence the necessary distance.

With Florida's longer growing season and the diversity of pepper varieties that mature at different times, it is possible for a farmer to stagger the planting times of different varieties, creating natural isolation through timing differences of flowering. For example, sweet bell peppers are typically earlier to fruit and done producing long before flowering occurs for longer season varieties like Aji Dulce. This allows these two varieties to be planted nearby with minimal risk of cross-pollination. Planting varieties during different seasons to prevent overlapping flowering times is also a strategy. However, farmers should consider the risks and benefits of pests and disease for different seasons in their area and plan accordingly. Farmers should also consider whether a variety is daylight sensitive, as this will impact productivity, if planted later in the year as daylight hours begin to decrease. Paying close attention to the days to flower of each variety grown on the farm, will allow for the best planning of time as an isolation tool.

GENETIC DIVERSITY AND SEED SAVING

As with any crop, **collecting seed from as many plants as possible is essential for maintaining genetic diversity within a variety**. This is true even for highly self-pollinating plants like peppers. Growing a larger number of plants provides more opportunities to select the best plants for seed saving, while maintaining as much diversity as possible within a variety.

Opinions vary on ideal populations of plants to grow and save from. If a variety has been well maintained, McCormack recommends 40-75 plants. This may be easily obtained on a farm growing large numbers of plants. **At a minimum, it is advisable to save from at least 5-20 plants to maintain a variety** (Buttala and Siegel 2015). The more plants that are grown, the greater the opportunity to maintain genetic diversity by pooling seeds from many plants. A larger planting also allows for better selection, enabling farmers to remove weaker performing individuals and select for the most vigorous plants, or best quality fruit.

While you can't select for individual fruit characteristics from a single plant (since they all share the same genetics), selecting plants that differ in traits like disease resistance, overall vigor, and overall fruit quality is a key part of the seed-saving process, and is how plants continue to improve over time to localized growing conditions! For more in depth reading of on-farm plant breeding techniques, see Organic Seed Alliance's publication, *Introduction to On-Farm Plant Breeding*, listed in the Resources section.

An interesting discussion in seed saving communities is the practice known as “landrace” plant breeding and seed saving to create diverse mixes of crops with increased resilience and local adaptation. This highly contrasts the common seed saving literature and commercial seed industry standards of preserving pure and uniform varieties, avoiding cross-pollination entirely (unless creating a highly controlled F1 hybrid).

For generations, Indigenous farmers have embraced crop diversity. In some traditional maize fields for example, wild relatives like teosinte (the origin of all modern day corn, that is still alive today) are allowed to grow along the edges. Far from being a weedy nuisance, teosinte is valued for its ability to boost the vigor of the corn crop. This natural mixing has played an important role in maize evolution since the beginning of domestication. It gives farmers more to observe, select from, and carry forward in their seed saving. Today’s plant breeders use similar techniques in controlled environments, but the practice itself has deep roots in Indigenous knowledge. It’s a reminder that crop diversity isn’t just a strategy, it’s a tradition.

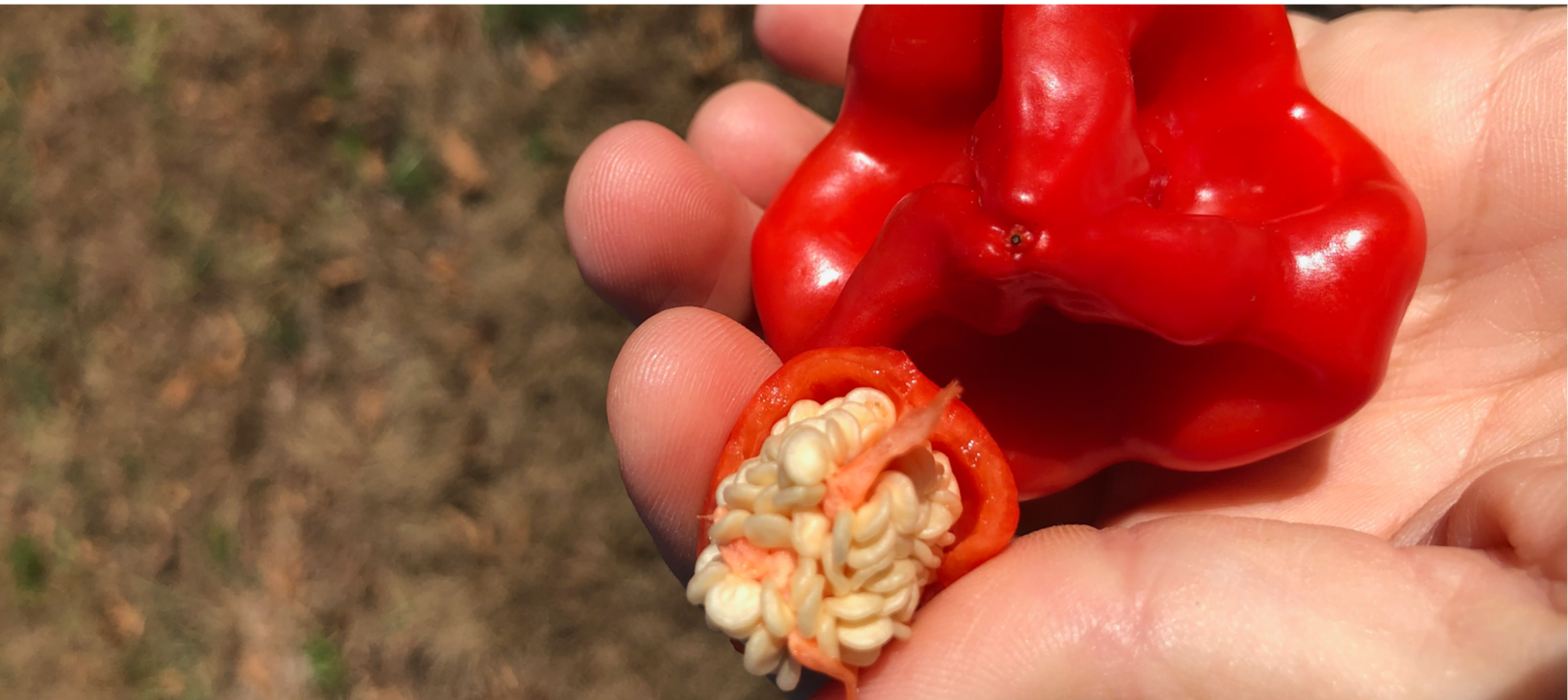
At the same time, there are good reasons to maintain uniformity and preserve specific traits, especially in commercial production. Each grower brings their own priorities to the field, and there’s room to choose a path that fits your goals. For those interested in exploring further, see the References section for helpful resources (Kimmerer 2018, Lofthouse 2021, Robinson 2007, Going to Seed website).

SEED YIELDS

The amount of seed that can be expected from a crop can vary widely based on a number of factors that impact crop production. This variability and lack of data is present even among many seed companies who pay growers to produce seed! While the best data will come from your own observations, the following references can provide helpful starting points.

For example, seed yield data from a Canadian seed farmer and seed company suggest that a 100’ bed may yield 1-4 pounds of seed (Brisebois 2025). A paper by Organic Seed Alliance suggests that roughly 1 pound of sweet pepper seed can be produced in 1,000 square feet of commercial growing space, equivalent to roughly 43 lbs per acre. The seed content of harvested fruit typically ranges from 0.5% to 10% of the fruit's weight. For instance, 10 pounds of harvested peppers may have between 0.05 (0.8oz)– 1 pound of seed. Hot peppers generally yield 3 to 5 times more seeds per plant than sweet pepper varieties.

If a farmer is mostly growing for market, and selecting some of the best plants for seed, this number will be much less per bed foot. Ultimately, the only way to obtain accurate seed yield data, is to conduct your own measurements with the specific varieties grown. This information will be very useful when entering a seed contract with a seed company, ensuring you are growing a variety that will provide a worthwhile seed yield.



GROWER INSIGHT: AN ACCIDENTAL NEW VARIETY

All peppers—sweet or hot, even from different species, can cross-pollinate. How likely that is depends on what else is blooming nearby and how many pollinators are around. If multiple pepper varieties are grown close together and there aren't many other flowers to distract the bees, chances of crossing go up. This can lead to surprises when seeds are saved!

At Hammock Hollow Farm in Island Grove, Florida, a mix of pepper varieties were grown, all that are the same species, *Capsicum chinense*:

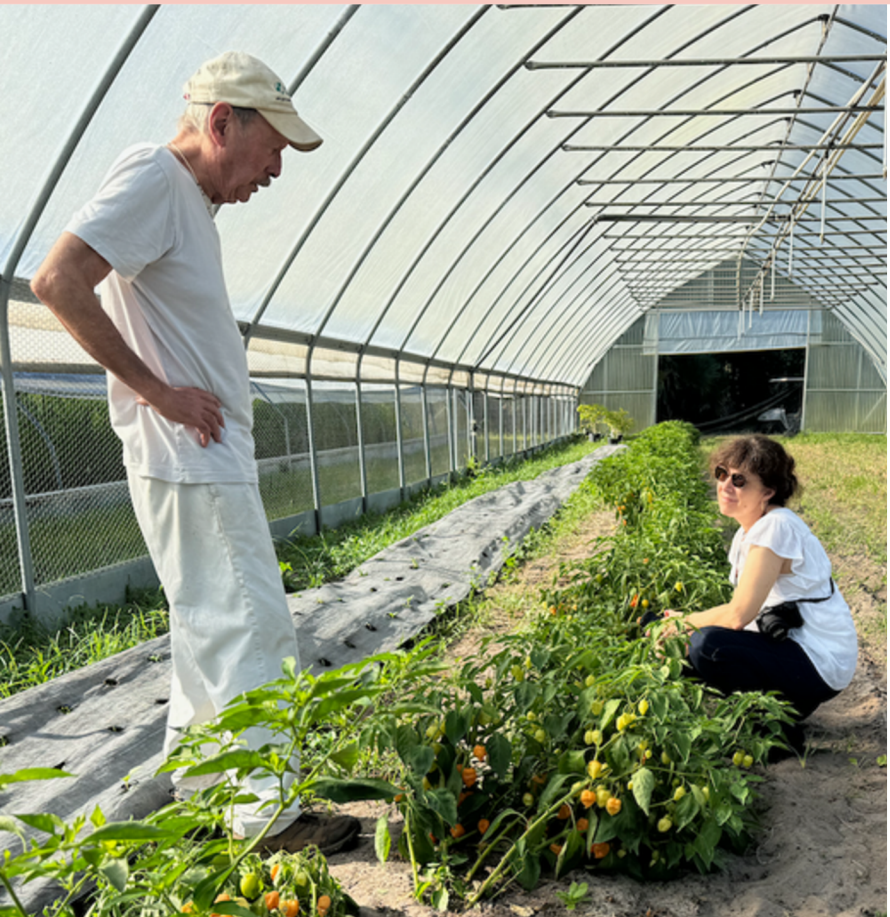
- Habanada (an orange sweet tasting and heatless habanero)
- Trinidad Perfume (a yellow spice type with sweet flavor and only occasional traces of heat)
- Aji Dulce (a red spice type with very unique and aromatic flavors)

The farmer's main goal was to save seed from the Trinidad Perfume, that was hard to find and expensive to buy seeds from. But the possibility of cross-pollination wasn't considered at the time. Like many market farmers, many varieties of the same crop are grown at once, and in proximity for ease of cultivation practices.

The seeds may have been saved from that same season, or possibly a previous one. Either way, when they were planted the following year, they produced a wide variety of fruits. Out of 98 plants, only one matched the original Trinidad Perfume. The rest had different shapes, sizes, and colors—most turning orange like Habanada, others with traits that suggested Aji Dulce may also have played a role. Most were elongated, large orange peppers with the flavor characteristics of habanero without the heat. The diversity pointed to a second-generation (F2) population, where the mixed genetics really start to show.

Even though the results didn't preserve the original Trinidad Perfume, the new peppers were tasty, attractive, and sold well at markets and to restaurant chefs. Their larger size meant a higher production too, with more to sell. Rather than seeing it as a loss, the farmer became curious, choosing the best plants and saving seeds again, now with more awareness of how new varieties can be developed through selection over time.

This experience shows that while maintaining varietal purity is important if you want a specific pepper, accidental crossings can also lead to something new and worth growing. If you do want to preserve a pure variety like Trinidad Perfume, it's best to go back to the original seed and take steps to avoid crossing in future plantings.



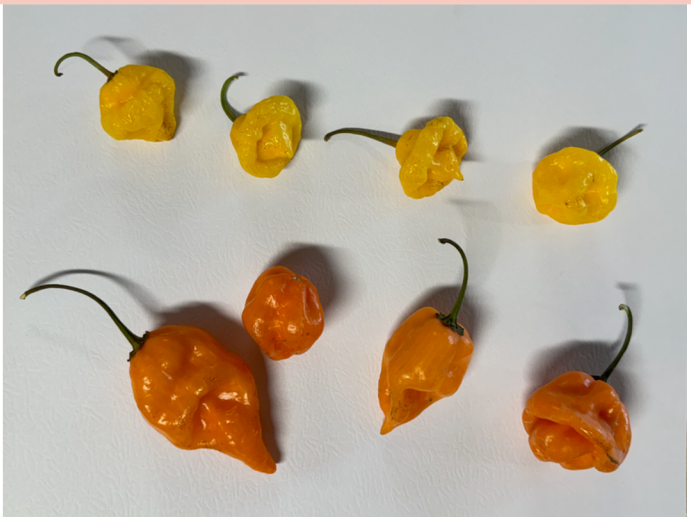


Figure 2 (top): Examples of typical peppers that came from the most recent planting, a suspected mix up of 2-3 different varieties. Shapes and colors of the various types are evident.

Figure 3 (left): Charley Andrews and Dr. Danielle Treadwell observe the pepper plants at Hammock Hollow Farm, growing in the high tunnel in August 2024.

HARVEST AND POST-HARVEST HANDLING

When a pepper is fully ripe at its final color, the seeds are also mature and ready to harvest. Getting to know the variety's final ripened color is important - is it red, yellow, gold, orange, red, purple, or brown? While picking too early is fine for eating and market, it is unsuitable for seed. When peppers appear uniformly pigmented with one color, they are likely to be at full seed maturity (Navazio 2012).

It is important to pick ripe fruit promptly, as the humid and hot conditions on Florida farms is conducive to rot. In dry climates, fruit can be left on the plant for several days past edible harvest in order to start drying down and maturing seeds further. This is not advised in Florida. Pick mature fruit by hand to avoid damage, and **allow peppers to rest in a conditioned room for several days before processing the seed**. This gives the seed more time to mature with less risk for rot than if they were left out in the field.

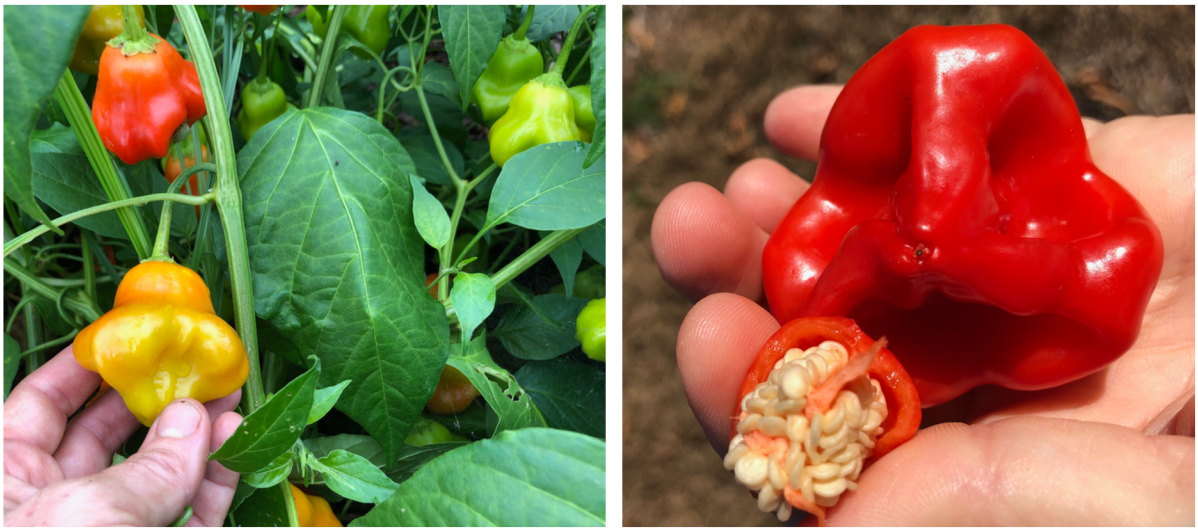


Figure 4: Various color changes occur in this variety of Brazilian Starfish Pepper (C. baccatum) as they progress towards their final ripened stage, which is a deep red like the one pictured right. None of the peppers in the photo on the left should be harvested for seed, but are fine to harvest for market and eating.

SELECTION OF PLANT AND FRUIT QUALITY TRAITS

Like many crops, peppers in Florida face disease, pests, temperature swings, and day length sensitivity. These challenges make local seed saving especially valuable, giving farmers the chance to select for traits that improve the variety over time to local conditions and personal preferences. Start with a well-performing variety, then **make intentional selections over time**. If no single trait stands out, save seed from as many healthy plants as possible to maintain genetic diversity. If selecting for specific traits like earliness, shape, color, flavor, size, overall vigor etc. — **clearly mark standout plants and fruits**. Even stable varieties can have notable variations.

Set aside the best fruits from the best plants as *stock seed*—used to continue improving the variety. Any surplus can be shared. To avoid seed-borne disease, harvest seed early in the season before disease pressure builds. Typical practices used to prevent disease that benefits marketable fruit production, will also benefit seed quality. Some farmers use high tunnels to protect high value crops such as peppers and tomatoes, but consider that field stress can help identify resilient plants worth saving. Ultimately, the seed-saving strategy should align with the farm's goals, whether that's fruit production, marketable seed, long-term varietal improvement, or some combination.

Growers should be aware of potential seed-borne diseases to avoid carrying them over onto future crops. The extent of pepper diseases and their potential for becoming seed-borne is beyond the scope of the publication. Working with local extension services to accurately identify disease is helpful for understanding prevention strategies, and whether any disease present could be transmitted to seed. For more on selecting for resistance and resilience, see Robinson (2007).

On farms with multiple workers, clear systems are key. Mark seed-saving plants with flags, use labeled bins or buckets, and consider assigning a seed-saving lead.

GROWER INSIGHT: WHEN GOOD FARMING PRACTICES HIDE WEAK PLANTS

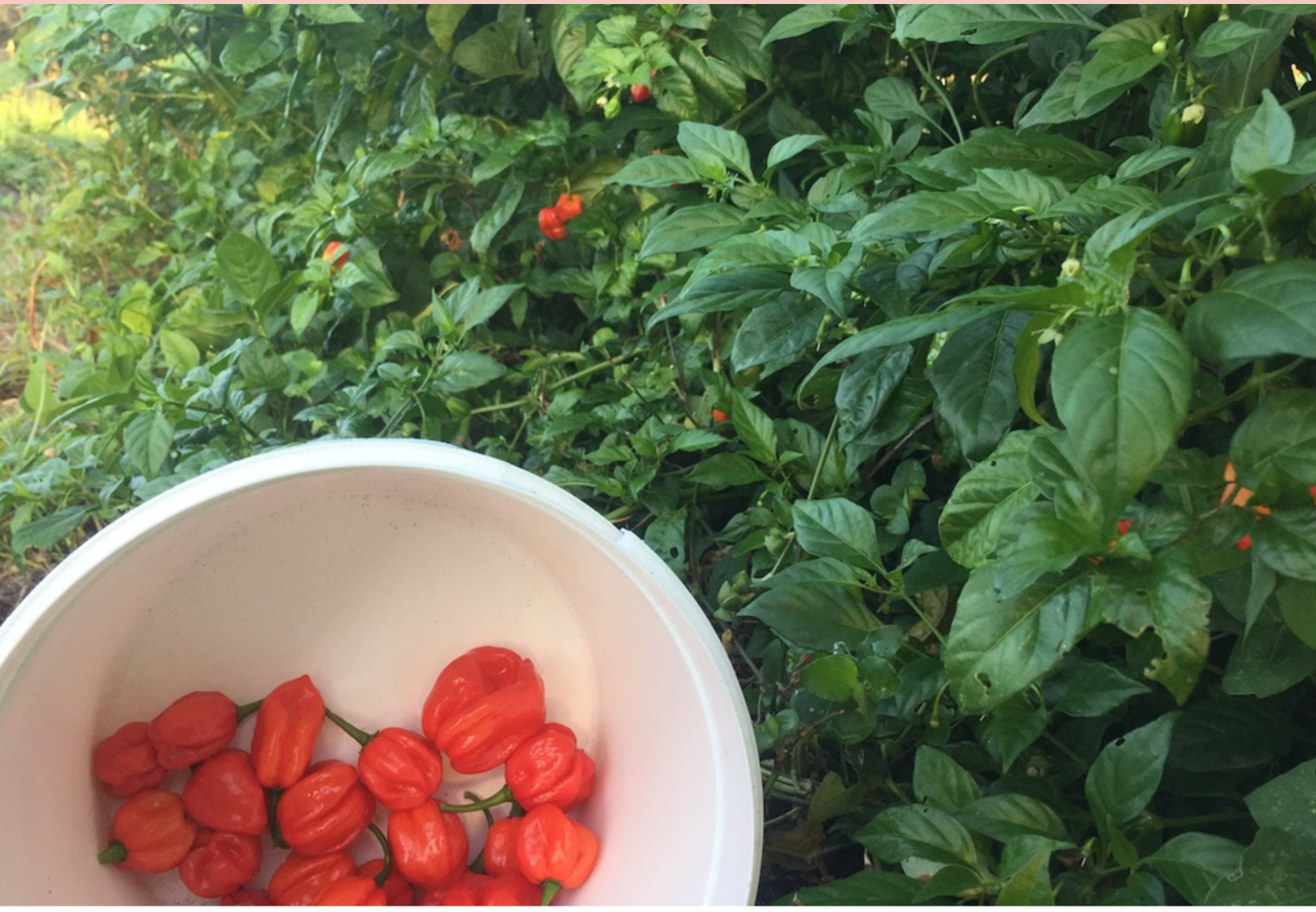
Joe Durando of Possum Hollow Farm in Alachua, Florida, shared this strategy for building disease resistance into pepper varieties. This is specific to soil-borne fungal pathogens like *Fusarium* that can lead to root rot, stunted growth and significant yield loss.

Many small growers are very good land stewards, with management practices that favor good soil health with long crop rotations that lead to naturally suppressed pathogen populations. This is a key tenet in any farming practice to prevent issues from building up and becoming problematic.

But if the soil is healthy and rotations are long, plants may not face enough disease pressure to reveal their true resistance. Potentially weak and susceptible plants could be hiding among an otherwise healthy looking crop, because of good farming practices. ***Fusarium* resistance can't be selected if it's not present in the field.** Although the seed may be high quality because of the health of the soil and thus the plants, they may still be susceptible to diseases like *Fusarium*. Growing at another farm where practices are not as good, and pathogens may have built up, the pepper crop may not fare as well.

Commercial breeders often inoculate fields with known pathogens to screen plants. On a smaller scale, one option is to intentionally skip rotation on a small test plot to let natural soil-borne pathogens build up. This creates pressure that helps reveal which plants can truly tolerate or resist local threats.

It's not for everyone, but it's a practical method for farmers interested in long-term seed saving and varietal improvement. As always, it's best to start with a variety if it's available, that is known to have the resistance that is desired.



SEED PROCESSING AND STORAGE

The following process is intended for small-scale operations processing seeds by hand, versus mid to large-scale operations that use mechanical seed extractors. While hand processing is more time-consuming, it allows farmers to carefully inspect individual internal fruit quality and ensures the leftover flesh can be eaten. In contrast, mechanical seed extractors macerate the fruit, preventing selections for the best fruits and diminishing the flesh so it is only useful for animal feed or compost.

SEED EXTRACTION

Pepper seeds can either be dry or wet processed. In Florida's climate, dry processing does not mean allowing entire peppers to dry and then crushing the dried fruit and seeds, as is practiced in other climates. This would likely lead to rot of the seed cavity and/or the fruit, and is only suitable for small, thin-fleshed fruits. Instead, carefully cut the tops of each pepper that hold the seeds, away from the main flesh, and allow them to air dry until the seeds are easy to remove. This can be done in a climate controlled room that is well ventilated, or with a dehydrator. See details about home dehydrators below.

For larger volumes of peppers, or for smaller-fruited varieties that are time consuming to process, the fruits can be handled in a food processor using a plastic dough blade and water. Do not use a metal blade as it can damage the seed. Remove the stem and place seeded cores (for larger fruits), or entire small fruits into the food processor, then cover with water to prevent the seeds from hitting the blade. Process minimally with just enough time to allow the turbulence of the water to remove the seeds. Wash and strain the slurry to separate the seeds. Good seeds are more likely to sink, allowing floating seeds to be poured off with any debris. If there are a lot of floating seeds, be sure to inspect them, as some may be viable even if they do not sink.

For more options and ideas for seed processing and equipment, see Jeff McCormacks' Pepper Seed Production guide listed in the Resources section.

Figure 5: Most of the flesh is removed for eating, leaving behind the cores and seeds only to dry down further. Dried pepper cores and seeds easily separate when handled. This method is time consuming but allows inspection of each core for rot, removal of bad seeds, and eating of the fleshy parts without waste.

DRYING AND STORAGE

Washed and strained seed should be dried as quickly as possible. Spread the seeds in a single layer on screen-bottomed trays or absorbent fabric (not paper, as it sticks). Seeds should be shuffled around daily to increase air flow and prevent sticking. Due to the high ambient humidity in North Florida and the presence of seed-eating rodents and birds, air drying outdoors is not recommended. For short-term storage and personal use, drying seeds indoors in an air conditioned space is adequate. A home dehydrator may be used effectively, especially for larger seeds, but **temperatures should be kept below 100F** to prevent damaging the seed (Motis 2010). Once the seeds are fully dried and separated from the other plant materials, it is helpful to run them through a vacuum aspirator or other type of winnowing process, if available. This will help separate out poor quality seeds, as well as lighter weight debris still present.

For optimal storage, **place silica beads or clay zeolite beads in roughly equal volumes in a sealed container** with the seeds to further reduce moisture. Place the beads in a breathable mesh bag so they are easy to separate from the seeds. Store dried seeds in a paper bag or envelope inside an airtight and leak-proof container like a mason jar or plastic container with a rubber gasket lid, in conditions that are cool, dark, dry, and stable. At this point, if drying beads were used, they can be removed. For more detailed information about seed drying and storage, see our publication listed below, *Seed Drying and Storage in Hot and Humid Climates.*

Proper drying and storage are crucial for all farmers, whether preserving purchased seeds for future seasons or saving seeds from a season's harvest. **Seed quality and longevity are greatly affected by how well seeds are dried and stored**. Seed will quickly deteriorate if not properly dried and left in less than ideal storage conditions (i.e.light, humid, warm, unstable, etc.).

Properly stored pepper seeds can last for many years. In Working Food's seed bank, seeds stored at low relative humidity (below 30%) and a consistent temperature of 72°F have maintained germination rates around 70% for 4 years. This tracks with other sources that suggest a 2-4 year lifespan (Connolly and Lawn 2011, Buttala and Siegel 2015). Fully dried and frozen, they will likely last much longer.

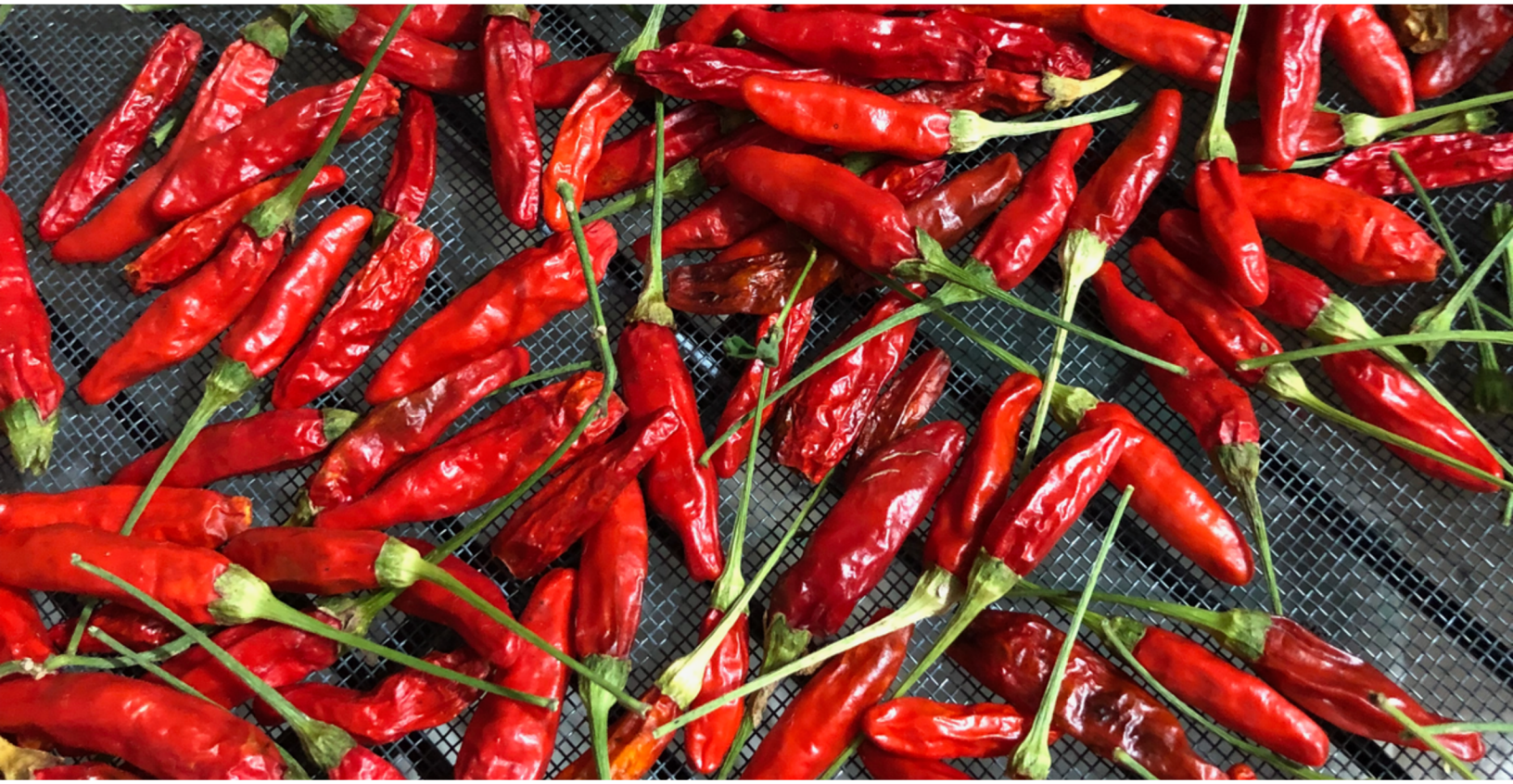


Figure 6: Smaller and thin-fleshed peppers like these Tabascos, may be dried whole if adequate drying conditions are available. They will crumble when fully dried and seeds can be separated from the dried fleshy bits. Simple seed cleaning machinery and/or screens may be needed to accomplish this, and it may be more tedious than other methods described here. If they are hot peppers, extra protection measures will be needed!

SUMMARY

Peppers are a dependable and productive crop for Florida farmers. Saving the seeds is compatible with market crop production because market ready fruits and seeds are both mature at the same time. By saving seeds, farmers can secure stock for future plantings without purchasing new seeds, while improving open-pollinated varieties for adaptation to local conditions and preferences for fruit quality.

Two primary considerations are the cross-pollination potential with other pepper varieties, and the time required for seed processing. Cross-pollination will likely limit farmers to growing only one variety at a time unless they are able to distance the varieties enough to prevent crossing, stagger their plantings to prevent flowering overlap, or wish to create new varieties by allowing crossing. The time required for seed processing will vary depending on the farmer's objectives, but the process is relatively straightforward: simply remove seeds and allow them to dry. To get the highest quality seeds, it is important to know the specific variety's signs of a fully ripe pepper, and process seeds quickly before they rot inside the pepper.

The reward is substantial with a high volume of seeds produced, ensuring a future crop. The cost to produce peppers varies by farm and practices used. If growing for both market and seed it is possible to absorb the costs of seed production into the overall crop budget. With a little extra attention to detail, a farmer can participate in an age-old practice of stewarding a crop that reflects their farm's unique location, cultural practices, and personal preferences.

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This publication is one in a series of seed saving guides prepared for Florida farmers as part of a SARE Education Grant in 2023-2024 that allowed us to work closely with farmers to adopt seed saving practices on their farm. We are grateful for SARE's support of our project entitled, "*Local Food Needs Local Seed: Increasing Production and Use of Locally Adapted Seed with a Farm to Community Network*". More information about this project can be found on Working Food's website blog.

SOUTHERN SARE
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This material is based upon work that is supported by the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture, under award number 20223864037488 through the Southern Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program under subaward number 00003174. USDA is an equal opportunity employer and service provider. Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the view of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.