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## Peppers' nutritional punch, popularity highlight conference

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November 05, 2009 2:14 PM

Rod Santa Ana III  
 Texas AgriLife Communications

WESLACO — The nutritional value of peppers and their growing consumption will be the focus of the 12th Texas Pepper Conference, according to organizers.

The conference, organized by the Texas Pepper Foundation, will be Nov. 12 to 13 at the Texas AgriLife Research and Extension Center at Weslaco, 2301 E. Highway 83.

"People the world over are consuming more and more peppers and salsas and while people may eat them for the heat and taste they add to meals, they're also doing their bodies a great favor," said Dr. Ben Villalon.

Villalon, a professor emeritus and a retired Texas AgriLife Research pepper breeder in Weslaco, said the conference will highlight information important to growers, consumers and researchers.

"The good news is that peppers have a heck of a nutritional punch," he said. "They are naturally loaded with vitamins and nutrients that promote good health and help prevent cancer and other diseases. The great news is that through research and breeding, we can actually improve and increase those already high nutritional values."

Dr. Kevin Crosby, a pepper breeder with Texas AgriLife Research in College Station, said one example is a mild habanero pepper he released in 2004.

"That one has high levels of beta carotene, which is a nutrient essential to good health," he said. "Others we've released have high levels of antioxidants, like flavonoids, that have been implicated in possibly reducing certain cancers and heart disease. These antioxidants work with vitamins C and E to protect cells from damage that could cause cancer."

Dr. Bhimu Patil, a former researcher at the Texas A&M-Kingsville Citrus Center in Weslaco and now director of Texas A&M's Vegetable and Fruit Improvement Center in College Station, will discuss his laboratory's work with antioxidants in peppers.

"We're working, for example, to improve the extraction procedures of a very powerful antioxidant called myricetin, that until now had been ignored," he said. "This will help us quantify its levels so we can continue our research on it, which is just one of many in peppers that are important for human health."

In addition to Villalon, Crosby and Patil, other speakers include M.E. Matheron, University of Arizona; Deborah Villalon, South Texas College; Ronald French, Texas AgriLife Extension Service in Amarillo; Russ Wallace, AgriLife Extension in Lubbock; Thomas Quick, Grow More Inc., San Diego, Ca.; Allan Showler, USDA-ARS, Weslaco; Joe Masabni, AgriLife Extension, College Station; Daniel Leskovar, AgriLife Research, Uvalde; and John Jifon, AgriLife Research, Weslaco.

The keynote speaker will be Ray Prewett, president of Texas Vegetable Association in Mission, who will discuss the outlook for the Texas vegetable industry.

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In the U.S., peppers are produced in Texas, California, Georgia, Florida and New Mexico. The leading producers abroad include India, China, Turkey and Mexico, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

Dr. Juan Anciso, an AgriLife Extension vegetable specialist in Weslaco and conference organizer, said peppers and salsas have become a national staple.

"Their popularity has exploded since the '90s," he said. "It's no longer just a Texas or Southwest novelty. People all over the country are now asking for salsas or making it themselves. Prior to the '90s, a lot of people didn't even know what salsa was."

The conference starts 6 p.m. Nov. 12 with a welcome and registration at the Best Western Palm Air Hotel in Weslaco.

At 8 a.m. Nov. 13, participants will view research field plots at the center in Weslaco. Talks begin at 10:30 a.m. at the center's Hoblitzelle Auditorium.

For more information or to register for the conference, contact Dr. Kevin Crosby at 979-845-7012, or e-mail k-crosby@tamu.edu. Or contact Villalon at 956-968-2549 or e-mail bevillalon@msn.com.

**Rod Santa Ana III is a communications specialist with Texas AgriLife Communications.**

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