



PHOTOS BY MAMTA POPAT / ARIZONA DAILY STAR
Leopoldo Lopez, left, fishes chile seeds out of the water at the Curry Seed and Chile Co. in Pearce. The owner, Ed Curry, supplies seeds to growers in the Southwest and to several Mexican states. Curry says he was 1 year old when his father started growing chile and credits his parents for instilling in him a love of farming and genetics.

The art, science of chile

Cochise County man leads U.S. in selling seed

By Thomas Stauffer
ARIZONA DAILY STAR

When it comes to market domination, Wal-Mart could learn a few things from Ed Curry.

Curry supplies the seed for more than 80 percent of the chile grown commercially in the U.S. from his seed farm and processing plant 75 miles southeast of Tucson.

In addition to supplying the seed for virtually all of the domestically grown green chile that makes its way into chile paste, powder and other food products, Curry also develops and refines jalapeños, cayenne peppers used for spices and other applications, paprika used to color everything from food products to lipstick, and capsaicin — the chemical that makes chiles hot, which is used for medicines and other applications.

"He has a great love and a



Crates filled with harvested chiles wait to be seeded at the Curry Seed and Chile Co. The company supplies 80 percent of the chile seed in the U.S.

great knowledge of chile, and he's really taken the lead in the industry," said Rich Phillips, senior project manager with the College of Agriculture and Home Economics at New Mexico State University and former coordinator of the New Mexico Chile Task Force.

While Curry derives the revenue for his Curry Seed & Chile Co. from about 10 different lines of chile seed, he's probably grown more than 3,000 varieties of chile

on his acreage, he said.

Curry leans over a paprika plant in his 1,500-acre farm, carefully plucks a pepper and waxes eloquent about his passion and fascination for breeding chile.

"The whole genetics thing, it's awesome," he said, tearing open a paprika to reveal the deep red meat that could wind up in a variety of lipstick. "Part of why we're so successful is that we literally have more research going on here than many universities."

Genetics has become a loaded term that conjures sci-fi images of test tubes, syringes and grotesque mutants escaping from laboratories. But Curry's use of the term refers to what is essentially selective breeding, a practice as old and earthy as dirt — raising an acre of crops or a litter of puppies, culling the individuals with the qualities you most want to develop, breeding them, then starting the whole process over again.

Genetics: Wait till next year

"The great part about genetics is you can't wait until the next year to see what you've done," Curry said. "The whole beauty of genetics is you're never satisfied. You're always trying to improve."

Ed Curry wasn't formally educated in genetics, but through long-term relationships with world-class California breeder Phil Villa and others, and through years of experience in the field, he is widely hailed in the industry for his prowess and innovation in chile genetics, Phillips said.



Ed Curry says research is a big part of his chile-seed business. "Part of why we're so successful is that we literally have more research going on here than many universities."

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Making a living down on the farm

Although the move is to corporate farming, two New Mexico families are bucking the trend. Page D7