

## Pet Birds & Hot Peppers

### Are hot peppers safe for pet birds?

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What's new in the kitchen? BIRD TALK readers have concerns about hot peppers. Are they safe? You'll be amazed at some of the details that make the answers to this question a little more complex than you might have thought! Did you know, for instance, that certain habañoero peppers are 100 times as hot as a jalapeño?

Reader Heather had a question about hot peppers:

I am not sure if I can feed my parrots hot peppers like the habañoero, which is really hot. I use to feed the birds milder green peppers like jalapeño, and they love it, but the habañoero is really hot so I don't know if it's safe.

The chemical that makes peppers hot is capsaicin. The concentration of "heat" in peppers varies widely. Sweet peppers and bell peppers are the mildest, followed by semi-hot peppers and hot varieties such as jalapeños.

The spicy heat is measured in Scoville units, with sweet peppers measuring 0 units, and jalapeños measuring 2,500 to 5,000 units, depending on variety and growing conditions. Habañoero peppers are much more pungent at 80,000 to 300,000+ units, and even hotter varieties are cultivated. A pepper that grows wild in India (*capsicum frutescens*) is reputed to be 50 percent hotter than even the hottest habañoero!

What's all this got to do with our parrots? Many bird food mixes include dried hot peppers as part of the blend, and birds seem to enjoy munching on them and making hot pepper "soup" out of their water. Hot peppers aren't toxic to our birds, but they may present some problems for us. We have to remember to keep our hands out of the seed mix, and certainly not to rub our eyes after we've handled hot pepper enhanced bird food! Germs (ours, not theirs!) notwithstanding, it isn't a good idea to kiss your bird after it has eaten hot peppers either ... you'll be rewarded with burning lips! One side benefit of food mixtures that include hot peppers is that you'll have a ready supply of heat when you need to spike the chili or spaghetti sauce! I've often raided the bird food canister for a pepper or two!

If you elect to serve your birds fresh peppers, wash them carefully to remove bacteria and pesticide residue. Offer small, whole peppers or cut larger ones into chunks. Use disposable cutting sheets for this purpose, or be careful to wash your cutting board well afterwards, as subsequent foods will pick up the "heat"! Wash your hands immediately, and be careful when you service the cage later in the day. Discarded pepper parts can still be an irritant. If you rub your face or eyes with pepper-contaminated hands, severe burning or irritation may result.

Parrots seem to be able to eat hot peppers with impunity, but if your bird shows any signs of irritation, sensitivity or digestive upset after eating peppers, take them off the menu.

Feed peppers as small treats, not as a mainstay of the diet. Consult your avian veterinarian for specific dietary advice.

### Hot Peppers Repel Garden Pests!

Troubled by garden pests? My grandmother repelled certain bugs and critters from her garden by spraying plants with a mixture made from hot peppers, water and a little dishwashing detergent! Put a cayenne, habañoero, or another variety of very hot pepper, into a blender with about a cup of water, and blend until liquefied. Pour the resulting "soup" through a strainer to remove any remaining solids, and add about a gallon of water to the clear mixture. To apply to plants, pour about ½ cup of this concentrate into a quart spray bottle, fill with water and a few drops of liquid dish detergent, shake to blend, and spray on garden plants. Protect your hands and eyes during the mixing and spraying process, and avoid inhaling the spray. It's nontoxic, but it sure can burn! Consult organic gardening books for more recipes for homemade pesticides.