

Virginia (Ginger) Ness traveled a different road to farming. A fourth-generation Arizonan, she started with a journalism degree from the University of Arizona and added another from Cornell University in produce management and operations. She has had her own fashion advertising companies in California and Alaska, and her skill with watercolors led to her own art show in Mexico City. She still spends most of the year in Mexico City with her husband, a U.S. fisheries attache, and their two sons. But every summer and fall Ginger comes to their farm near McNeal, in Cochise County, Arizona, to oversee the harvest and sale of what she believes to be the best chili peppers in the world.

The Ness family owns 160 acres and have farmed as many as five hundred, but Ginger's heart is with the thirty acres devoted to growing five varieties of peppers. "Our southeast corner's climate is akin to the best chili-growing seasons in New Mexico and Texas. We can grow almost any vegetable well in this valley, and we grow peppers exceptionally well." In addition to ordinary bell peppers, she raises mild long green, jalapeño, yellow hot poblano (sometimes called pasilla or anchos in Mexico), and the miniature, very hot cascabel peppers. To market them, she formed the Great Whitewater Vegetable Packing Company. "Our peppers have a high-quality reputation that we worked hard to develop."

Maintaining that quality reputation requires picking the peppers after she receives the orders so they are as fresh as possible. The peppers are rushed from the nearby field, packed in ten-pound boxes, and refrigerated; she has the only cold storage for peppers in the county. Within forty-eight hours, refrigerated trucks are on their way to the markets. Except for those sold at a corner roadside stand, Ginger markets most of the peppers in Tucson and Phoenix through outlets she has worked with for five or six years. Using ten-pound boxes is a deliberate ploy, she says. "I've tried to get away from the chillies-in-a-sack image."

In late fall Ginger switches to dried chili strings and makes chili wreaths and hearts. "We can't make enough of them." She was invited to the Tucson

SOME LIKE IT HOT!



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Photos by Lynn G. Ketchum

Botanical Gardens' annual chili festival in 1988 where she roasted green chilies and made ristras (chili strings). She laughs when she tells how her invitation to the festival came about. "I went to the first festival last year and said to everybody, 'Where did you get your chili strings; they're terrible!' This year they asked me to come and show them how."

California grower and friend of the family Rex McDaniel helped them get a contract with La Victoria, a major pepper processor, when the Nesses started in the pepper-growing business six years ago. They planted as many as ninety acres of peppers when they had a commercial contract—"a hell of a lot," Ginger commented. She's the one who diversified into growing for the fresh market, which is now her total effort.

Fresh-market chilies have an increasing share of the Cochise County chili industry, says Dr. Deborah Young, UA county Extension agricultural agent. The industry suffered a major blow in 1986 when the largest processing plant, run by Del Monte Company, left the county. The crop value fell from nearly \$6 million in 1986 to \$522,000 in 1987. Since that time the acreage has fluctuated considerably. In 1986, 642 acres were planted with chili peppers; in 1987, the acreage rose to 1,076; but in 1988 chilies were only grown on approximately 700 acres. Raising chili peppers is a labor-intensive business that attracts farmers with a small acreage, Deborah says. "Where chilies are hand-picked, most growers work fewer than a hundred acres, especially if they sell to the fresh market."

Benito Gutierrez, the grower who works with Ginger, begins the hand labor almost as soon as the peppers are direct-seeded in the spring. After the pepper seedlings emerge, it's a matter of constantly watching for diseases, fertilizing, and thinning by hand. To keep yields up and diseases down, he rotates fields; after planting chili peppers one year, the ground is kept fallow or planted with corn for three years. He and Ginger decided to plant chilies in shorter, wider rows. She says the water flows more quickly to the far end of the field so it only takes five hours to irrigate a field. She also believes that the water sinks in more evenly and quickly so that

during extended harvests, pickers are less-often delayed by muddy fields.

A crew of five hand-harvests the peppers as soon as the crop is ready and the orders have come in. Ginger gives full credit for her reputation for supplying top-quality peppers to Romulo Moreno, the man in charge of the picking crew. "He's really special, but then, they all take pride in picking only the best." The same crew has worked for her for three years, so they understand her insistence on quality. They're hard workers, starting in the fields at five in the morning; Ginger is out checking the harvest by seven, before she gets on the phone to buyers.

By now, produce buyers in Tucson and Phoenix know Virginia Ness and her chili peppers quite well. It wasn't always



that way. "We've always felt that our Elfrida-McNeal area pepper production was one of the produce industry's best-kept secrets. The Sulphur Spring Valley is the home of the best chili peppers in the country—maybe the world. The climate is perfect," says Ginger.

Last year may have been an exception. Chili growers in the Sulphur Springs Valley prefer fairly sparse rainfall, especially in the late summer and fall. In 1988, the area received fourteen inches, way too much, as far as Ginger is concerned. The pepper plants matured too quickly and harvest was cut short, making the year one of her poorest on record, she says. Ironically, the excess rain was the second weather-caused blow to the pepper industry last year; in May, a late freeze caused severe

damage to the County's fruit and chili growers. The irony for Ginger is that her crop had survived the freeze in good condition. "Bob Berkowitz of the Weather Service and Deb Young let everyone know the freeze was coming. Our guys were up all night watering, two nights running, to keep the plants protected."

Far from giving up, Ginger will experiment with some recommended methods next year. Taking Deborah Young's advice, she'll try using black plastic mulch to minimize weeds. She's also providing Deborah with some field space to experimentally put calcium nitrate on the fields during harvest to help prolong the picking period.

The chilies inspire enthusiasm in both women. Deborah says, "It's a neat crop." Ginger agrees and adds that because they're loaded with vitamin C, peppers are a very healthy vegetable for people to eat. "Nationwide, people are becoming more sophisticated about hot peppers; they're not just a part of Mexican cuisine anymore." She predicts a continuing market—a market Ginger Ness will keep right on developing. 🌱

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