

Plants That Produce PITAYA, THE DRAGON FRUIT

By Richard Frost

Imagine a vining cactus like Christmas Cactus, but with stem sections up to 16" long, giant fragrant blossoms that open at night, and sweet fruit the size of a softball. This is what our neighbors to the south call *Pitaya*, and what peoples of the eastern hemisphere have named Dragon Fruit. It is easy to grow and a pleasure to eat.

Cutting the fruit open, one finds a texture and scent similar to a fragrant cantaloupe. The flesh of the fruit contains numerous black poppy-sized seeds that are eaten with the fruit. I recommend it for breakfast, in salads, as an appetizer wrapped in prosciutto, in ice cream or sorbet – any way you might use melon. The fruit exterior color is often green or red, and the interior ranges from white to dark purple. Exotic colors and variegation are also available.

The fruit is sold regularly at produce stores and farmers markets here in San Diego and throughout the state. U.S. vendors typically ask \$5 to \$8 per fruit, perhaps more in upscale locations. In Mexico and Latin America the fruit sells for 50¢ to \$2 alongside many other varieties of cacti fruits. Some growers in those areas are now up to U.S. standards for import, so San Diego consumers will likely see prices drop to the \$2-\$3 range in the next year or so.

About 400 years ago the Pitaya was imported from Central America to the Orient. There it was cultivated not only for its taste but for the sepal-covered fruits that are reminiscent of dragon scales. From its appearance grew stories of mystical powers and, ultimately, the name Dragon Fruit.

An important point to note: Pitaya is different from *Pitahaya* – a columnar cactus with similar looking fruits native to northern Mexico. Over the last 200 years, writers in the U.S. and Europe have confused the two names to the point of absurdity. In central Mexico, you will find the two fruits being sold in different bins, with the less desirable Pitahaya at a cheaper price. In the U.S., you will find Pitaya sold under both names!

All true Pitaya are members of the genus *Hylocereus*. The species *H. guatemalensis* is very adaptable to our climate. Its cultivar 'American Beauty' is a three-time taste test winner at the annual Pitaya Festival held in Southern California. *H. undatus* has been actively grown and bred by the California Rare Fruit Growers (www.crfg.org). Two other species, *H. ocamponis* and *H. polyrhizus*, are grown less for produce but widely used in breeding programs. The hybrid 'Physical Graffiti' has a sweet but complex taste and is repeatedly a runner-up in taste tests.

To grow Pitaya: get a single stem section 8" or longer from a friend, put some Rootone® on it, bury it half way up in a pot with filled with citrus soil mix (cactus mix is too low in organics for this native to the Yucatan region), and water it semi-regularly. It flourishes under 30% shade, dislikes the midday sun, and perishes in a hard freeze. It will need a trellis to climb on or be tied to. Some varieties are known to need a cross-cultivar, so either avoid them or get a few of each. If you are friendless in the Pitaya category, you will find a huge variety for sale and a beautiful online catalog at www.tropicalfruitnursery.com/dragon.

SDHS member Richard Frost is also member of the California Rare Fruit Growers. For more information, see www.plantsthatproduce.com