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CUSTARD APPLE: CULTIVATION AND MEDICINAL USES

Custard apples contain anti-oxidants like Vitamin C, which helps to fight free radicals in our body. These are also rich in potassium and magnesium, which protect us from cardiac diseases.



Custard apples are subtropical deciduous trees belonging to the Annonaceae family. This family comprises over 2000 plants spread throughout the world. Custard apple trees are large and spread out, with large, green drooping leaves. The tree has light yellow trumpet-shaped flowers that emit a pungent, sweet smell, especially in the late afternoon when the male pollen sacks burst open. Of these flowers, only a small number

bear fruit.

The fruit takes between 20 and 25 weeks to reach maturity in subtropical climates where the days are not too warm and the nights not too cool.

Characteristics

The custard apple tree is not especially attractive. It is erect, with a rounded or spreading crown and a trunk that is 25-35 cm thick. Its height ranges from 4.5 to 10 metres. The leaves are decidu-

ous, alternate, oblong or narrow-lanceolate, 10-20 cm long and 2-5 cm wide, with conspicuous veins. Flowers, in drooping clusters, are fragrant, slender, with three outer fleshy, narrow petals. They are light-green externally and pale-yellow with a dark-red or purple spot on the inside at the base. The flowers never fully open.

The compound fruit, 8-16 cm in diameter, may be symmetrically heart-shaped, lopsided, or irregular; or nearly round, with a depression at the base. The skin, thin but tough, may be yellow or brownish when ripe, with a pink, reddish or brownish-red blush. There is a thick, cream-white layer of custard-like, somewhat granular, flesh beneath the skin surrounding the concolorous moderately juicy segments, in many of which there is a single, hard, dark-brown or black, glossy seed. Actual seed counts range from 55 to 76. A pointed, fibrous, central core, attached to the thick stem, extends more than halfway through the fruit. The flavour is sweet and agreeable.

Origin and global distribution

Custard apple is believed to be a native of the West Indies but it was

carried in early times through Central America to southern Mexico. It has long been cultivated and naturalised as far south as Peru and Brazil. It is commonly grown in the Bahamas, and occasionally in Bermuda and southern Florida.

Apparently, it was introduced into tropical Africa early in the 17th century and is grown in South Africa as a dooryard fruit tree. In India, the tree is cultivated especially around Kolkata, and grows wild in many areas. It has become fairly common on the east coast of Malaya, and more or less throughout Southeast Asia and the Philippines, though nowhere is it particularly esteemed. Eighty years ago it was reported as thoroughly naturalised in Guam, in the Pacific, though it is not known in Hawaii.

Cultivars

No named cultivars are reported but there is considerable variation in the quality of fruit from different trees. The yellow-skinned types seem superior to the brownish, and, when well filled out, have thicker and juicier flesh. Seeds of a purple-skinned, purple-fleshed form, from Mexico, were planted in Florida and the tree has produced fruits of unremarkable quality.

Medicinal uses

Custard apples contain anti-oxidants like Vitamin C, which helps to fight free radicals in our body. These are also rich in potassium and magnesium that protect us from cardiac diseases. Apart from that, these also control our blood pressure. Custard apples contain Vitamin A, which keeps your skin and hair healthy. This fruit is also known to be great for the eyes, and cures indigestion. It's important to include this fruit in your diet, as the copper content helps to cure

Food Value of Custard Apple per 100 gm of Edible Portion*

Description	Value
Calories	80-101
Moisture	68.3-80.1 gm
Protein	1.17-2.47 gm
Fat	0.5-0.6 gm
Carbohydrates	20-25.2 gm
Crude fibre	0.9-6.6 gm
Ash	0.5-1.11 gm
Calcium	17.6-27 mg
Phosphorus	14.7-32.1 mg
Iron	0.42-1.14 mg
Carotene	0.007-0.018 mg
Thiamine	0.075-0.119 mg
Riboflavin	0.086-0.175 mg
Niacin	0.528-1.190 m
Ascorbic acid	15.0-44.4 mg
Nicotinic acid	0.5 mg

**Minimum and maximum levels of constituents from analyses made in Central America, Philippines and elsewhere*

constipation.

As the fruit is high in magnesium, it maintains the water balance in our body, which helps in removing acids from the joints and reduces the symptoms of rheumatism and arthritis. If you feel tired and weak more often than usual, then add this fruit to your daily diet, as the potassium present in it will help to fight muscle weakness.

And if you want to put on some weight, include this in your daily diet. Custard apple contains natural sugar, and hence makes a great nutritious snack and can even be added to desserts.

Varieties

The following are some of the varieties of custard apple grown in different agro-climatic regions of India: Red Sitaphal, Balanagar, Hybrid, Washington, Purandhar (Pune), Pink Mammoth and African Pride.

How to store custard apple

Custard apples are a fragile exotic fruit that get damaged easily if handled improperly. When buying the fruit, follow the guidelines listed below:

1. Purchase firm but not rock-hard fresh fruit
2. Avoid fruit that displays signs of turning black
3. Avoid small and dark green (premature) fresh fruit
4. Cover as well as keep at room temperature
5. Life expectancy is short. Therefore purchase few, more often
6. If you wish to speed up the maturing procedure, simply place the fruit in a dark brown paper bag along with a ripening banana and leave it. The banana will certainly speed up the ripening of the custard apple.

7. Store unripe custard apples at room temperature. As soon as ripe (soft), you can keep them in the fridge for approximately two days.

Ways to eat custard apple

Custard apple can be consumed only when ripe, only when it really is soft enough to open the fruit with only a mild poke of the finger.

It can be eaten on its own, and if the seeds are removed, the pulp can be given to little children. Though removing the seeds can be tedious, once done, and pureed along with unseeded dates and honey, it makes a healthy and delicious smoothie. The pulp is also used in ice creams and other desserts like cheesecakes.

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