

PENNY SAVER NEWS

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March 12, 2009

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Dragonfruit or Pitahaya?

Maybe you've noticed them in the grocery? Oval, red, but with little 'leaves' up and down the sides, they almost look like swollen red pine cones. Did you know what they are? If you're from Mexico or Central America you might know them as Pitahaya, but if your interest is more Asian, you might call them Dragonfruit. They're one and the same! Next question - Have you tried one yet? If not, get busy!

These interesting creatures are actually the fruits of climbing cactus. They bloom with gorgeous, huge white flowers. Each flower opens for just one night, showing off creamy white petals a foot across. Here in our gardens they're more likely to be just for decoration, but in SouthEast Asia where they are grown commercially they are trained to climb on trellises. This makes it easy to pick the fruit as they hang from the overhead vines.

There are several color combinations, but all are nutritionally equivalent. Most are a beautiful rosy red on the outside, with green or yellowish points of leaves. There is a yellow variety too, but it's not as commonly seen. Inside comes the surprise. The flesh can be a deep purple-red, white or any shade of pink in between. All are speckled with poppy-seed-sized black seeds. If the leaf tips are brown or brittle the fruit is probably overripe. Choose one that is slightly soft, with green leaves.

The red or yellow skin is rather leathery and not usually eaten. When the fruit is sliced the red or white interior with its black speckles is striking. It's beautiful to add

color and contrast to a plate or bowl of fruit salad. You can use a melon tool to scoop out tiny crunchy balls. Slice into wedges like a mini-watermelon then slide a knife under the skin to remove it. Just peel it with a sharp knife and have an entire red or white fruit. Or with the larger fruits, slice it crosswise into thin circles and use a cookie-cutter to make whatever shape you want to decorate your salad bowl.

The flavor is not strong, just slightly sweet. Most people seem to think it tastes better chilled. Some like the crunch of the seeds in the sweet juicy flesh. It resembles a watermelon or kiwi, slightly crisp but soft and juicy, with poppy seeds for texture. They can be a source of vitamin C and potassium if you eat enough. And they have traces of several B vitamins and other minerals.

Since the fruit is so juicy and not very sweet, you can guess that the fruit doesn't add a lot of sugar to your diet. Half a cup only has about 50 calories! It is mostly water, so it's a good thirst-quencher. Pieces of fruit can be blended for juice or smoothies, or steeped in water to make 'tea'. Dragonfruit wine is made in some countries.

The seeds would add some fiber and unsaturated fats to your diet. But for them to have any effect you have to chew them and open them up. If you do manage to chew on enough of them you might notice a slightly nutty flavor. Since they're so tiny that's hard to do, and the overall effect is not significant, they mostly go right on through. The pigment also goes right through us. If you eat enough of the red-fleshed variety, you might notice a pink tinge when you go to the bathroom!

The red-fleshed varieties are a decent source of antioxidants, although there has not yet been a lot of research done to see what health benefits they might offer us, or how much we'd need to eat to get the benefit. The red pigment is lycopene, which has

been suggested to protect us from certain cancers. In some countries there's a belief that dragonfruit is beneficial for diabetics, but that too is still to be studied.

Dragonfruit is great added to any salad, whether it's a spinach salad or a fresh fruit salad. Here's a sweet sauce you can use over fruit salad, or over angel food cake or even ice cream. Use a fresh Florida orange or lemon before they're gone for the season.

Honey-Orange Sauce

1/3 cup honey

1 Tbsp cornstarch

1 tsp grated orange rind (or lemon)

1/2 orange juice (use half lemon juice)

1/4 cup water

2 Tbsp butter or margarine

Combine honey, cornstarch and rind in heavy saucepan. Stir well until cornstarch is dissolved and not lumps remain. Stir in orange juice and water and stir again until smooth. Bring to boil, stir in butter and blend well while it melts. Serve warm or cold. It will get thicker as it cools. Makes about 1 cup.

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