



Avocado

Avocado is a fruit like no other. Of all fruits, it is the highest in protein and fat content, the sort of fat (mono-unsaturated) that is good for you. The tree is a member of the laurel family and native to subtropical America, spreading from Mexico to Peru and then to the West Indies. There are three original types of the species. The Mexican type, called by the Aztecs 'ahuacatl', meaning 'testicle', this is believed to be the origin of the English name, derived from attempts to speak phonetically the Aztec name. This type has smooth-skinned, purple or black fruit, and foliage with an anise scent. The Guatemalan type bears larger fruits with a rough green, black or purple skin. The West Indian type has the largest fruits, up to 1kg in weight and usually of a medium thickness skin and lighter green colour.

All cultivated avocados are believed to derive from these three types. In the New World, avocados were once very expensive and considered very exotic, now they are available all year round and are reasonably priced. There are more than 700 varieties grown worldwide, many of them are hybrids of various sizes, shapes and colours. About 70 are known to be grown in Australia, where the two main varieties are Hass and Shepard. Shepard generally has thin skin of a shiny green colour and stays this colour as it ripens, it also tends to be a bit of a pear shape. Shepard bears good quality, tasty fruit with a decent oil content. Hass has more pebbly skin and it starts off green but as it ripens its skin gradually turns into a dark olive colour, Hass can be roundish or pear-shaped and tends to be smaller. This 'knobbiness' explains one of the earlier names of 'alligator' pear. Hass is the most marketable and reliable producer in most areas as it is fairly cold and frost tolerant once established whereas Shepard is not at all frost tolerant. The salad or cocktail avocados are not another variety but immature fruits in which the seeds have not formed, they are eaten when ripe like a green cucumber. Avocado fruits mature slowly and steadily on the tree but put off ripening until they have been picked, then they will ripen in a warm room and more slowly in a refrigerator.

Avocado trees have a curious sex life. Some (known as group A) have flowers that function as female on the first morning they open, when they reopen in the afternoon the next day, they are functionally male. Other varieties (known as group B) have flowers that open in the afternoon of the first day as female then reopen the next morning as male. Orchards in warmer climate are usually planted with varieties of both types to assure good pollination. In some cooler areas, the opening and closing of flowers are not so well synchronized but there is usually enough overlap time for pollination to occur.

Culinary use: Avocado is equally delicious eaten as a vegetable or as a fruit. These days it is no longer the star of only South American cuisine, it features in many other international dishes like pasta, sushi, salads, dips, and appetizers as well as desserts like ice cream and milk shakes. Leaves can also be made into tea or roasted and used as a spice or flavouring. In Congo and some countries in South America, avocado leaves are used to make the sparkling and slightly alcoholic drink known as 'babine'.

Nutritional value: The fruits have a good amount of dietary fibre and high protein content; they are also rich in antioxidants, mono-unsaturated oil. Including them regularly in the diet is believed to help lower cholesterol levels.

Medicinal and other uses: Avocadoes are used for dry skin, scalp and hair. Poultices of leaves can be used for sprains and rheumatism. A ripe avocado, rubbed onto the affected place, is most soothing in cases of sunburn.

Avocado is now a major crop in many warm regions worldwide. The fruits are grown in Asia, Africa, Australia, the West Indies and many areas of Europe with Mediterranean climates as well as in many parts of their native continent. Australia has now become a leading producer of fine avocados with Queensland producing the largest quantity.

Avocados make wonderful fruit trees for the home garden. They are easily propagated from seeds but the seedlings are unreliable. Grafted plants from the nursery are a much better option as they are expected to produce fruits in two years after establishment.

Avocados also make great houseplants. Next time after you have enjoyed an avocado, don't throw out the seed. Plant it fat end down, place the pot in a warm spot but not in direct sunlight and within 4-6 weeks the stem will appear. Some people like to suspend the seed in a glass of water and wait for the roots to grow down into the water and the stem to come up before transplanting it into a pot. You won't get any fruits but you will get a very attractive leafy houseplant.

Grandparents and parents, take notes, this could be a worthwhile after school project for the young ones.

