

Dragon fruit or Pitaya



Varieties of dragon fruits

Looking for an unusual succulent plant – ornamental as well as fruit-bearing – to grow in your garden? Dragon fruit (English name) or Pitaya (Spanish name) could well be a good choice. The fruit is a weird-looking pink, purplish red or yellow, oval-shaped with green-yellow scales or wings on the skin, more recently known by other common names such as cactus fruit, strawberry pear, and poetic names like belle of the night, moonlight cactus. Once only seen in some exotic restaurants, this fruit is fast becoming commonplace in Acai bowls, fruit salads, as a garnish on cakes and as a fresh fruit.

Native to the rain forests of central and northern South America, dragon fruit today is cultivated in dry tropical or subtropical areas in many parts of the world, Southeast Asia, Southern California, the West Indies and more recently Australia. Based on the poetic names ‘belle of the night’, ‘moonlight cactus’, you might infer that something perhaps happens in the night – yes, you are right,

this is a nocturnal summer flowering plant, with large yellowy green on the outside open to a scented white, lily-like bloom for one night only to allow pollination from nocturnal insects, then wither by the morning. The leathery skin and pointy scales around the oval-shaped fruit is reminiscent of a dragon, hence the common name dragon fruit. The plant is an epiphyte cactus that clings to its support, it has fleshy succulent, 3-angled jointed stems with a wavy horny margin and long spines. The flowers develop into oval bright red or yellow fruit up to 10cm long often with large green tentacles. Depending on the species, the inner flesh can be white or red, peppered with small, black edible seeds. Basically there are three varieties of fruits: *Hylocereus undatus* (white flesh and red shell), *Hylocereus costaricensis* (red flesh and equally red shell), and *Hylocereus megalanthus* (white flesh and yellow shell). The white flesh and yellow shell variety is quite rare, often not found in standard greengrocers.

The plant is more suited to tropical and sub-tropical climates but will grow in all areas with protection from frost, it will grow in most soil types but needs free-draining soil. In wet or waterlogged soils, plants will rot, if this is the case in your garden, raise the garden bed to encourage drainage, or grow in a large pot instead, using a premium cacti and succulent mix. Being a climbing plant it will require support to climb on as it matures, if left to its own devices it becomes a scrambling scraggy mess, so a bit of training is in order. Plant against a thick stake or some other support and tie one or two main stems to the support to encourage vertical straight growth. Trim away any other side shoots. Once the stems have reached the desired height cut off their ends to encourage new branching shoots; these can then be allowed to spread out and hang downwards.

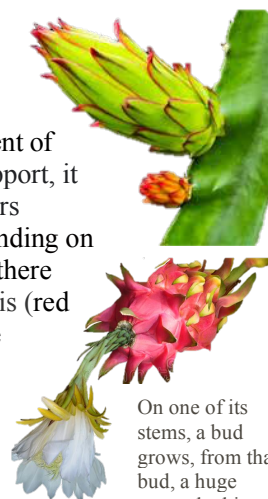
Cuttings usually strike well and may produce fruit 6-9 months from propagation. Simply break off a section around 30cm long and leave to dry in the shade, this seals the wound at the base of the cutting prior to planting. Plants take about 3 weeks to go from bud to flower and one month to go from flower to fruit. Plants can begin flowering in as little as six to nine months and bears fruits usually from summer through to autumn. If you would rather try your luck propagating from seed, cut the fruit in half and scoop out the seeds. Separate the seeds from the pulp and dry them before planting. However, seeds take longer to germinate.

In our mountain climate, growing dragon fruits in pots in a sheltered sunny corner of your patio as an ornamental plant is very much a possibility, just make sure your pot is large and has sufficient drainage. Container-grown plants take longer time to bear fruits, however the plants make lovely ornaments, and the fruits are the bonus.

To harvest and to eat: The season peaks in late summer and lasts into autumn. (By the way, the fruits are currently spotted in our mountains supermarkets and greengrocers). Regardless of variety, the fruit will be green in colour until it is ripe, at that time, it will either be bright yellow (quite rare), or more likely pink or red. To harvest, wait until the flaps of skin on the outside of the fruit start to wither, then twist the fruit gently – if it's ripe, it will easily give way. When purchasing the fruit, a bright and even colour is an indication of ripeness, avoid fruits covered with many blemishes, gently pressing the skin with your finger, it should yield a little, but it shouldn't feel too soft or mushy. The flower buds are a secondary crop, gathered before the flowers bloom, recognized as a culinary ingredient used in home cooking throughout Central and South America and Asia, though not commercially produced.

In the past, dragon fruits were mainly seen in specialty stores at a hefty price, nowadays, they are more affordable in standard greengrocers and in supermarkets. Given the fruit's weird appearance, some people might hesitate to give it a try. Don't let its spiky strangeness put you off. The fruit has a refreshing taste, it has been described as a slightly sweet cross between a kiwi and a pear. Much like an avocado, you eat the flesh and discard the skin. As tough as its

outer skin/shell may look, the fruit is easy to peel and easy to cut. Just half it, scoop out the flesh with a spoon or a melon baller and serve it chilled, some people likes to add a dash of lime/lemon juice to bring out its full flavour. Enjoy it on its own or add it to smoothies, yogurts, cocktails, fruit salads, desserts. Cube it and grill it like you would pineapple or capsicums on kebab skewers, use it as a vegetable, chop it finely to make a salsa to accompany main dishes. The possibilities are endless, just let your imagination go!



On one of its stems, a bud grows, from that bud, a huge scented white flower then forms.



Dragon fruit in a large pot