

The East London Garden Society

Plant Facts

Dragon Fruit



Dragon fruit (*Hylocereus undatus*) is a tropical fruit that belongs to the climbing cacti. The French introduced the fruit into Vietnam over a hundred years ago. According to some accounts, the French took the fruit from Nicaragua and Colombia, while others say the French brought it with them from Guyana (South America) in 1870 as an ornamental plant.

Today, Vietnam is the world's leading exporter of dragon fruit, with revenues from dragon fruit making 55 percent of the country's fruit export turnover. The main reason for dragon fruit's preciousness is that it lives only one night!

First, a climbing cactus produces a beautiful pink or yellow flower. Sometimes called *Moonflower* or *Queen of the Night*, the plant blooms from evening to midnight, only to wither in strong sunlight. During the night, the pungent flowers are pollinated by moths and bats. Although the flower dies, the cactus bears pitaya fruit about six times every year.

Dragon fruit, indigenous to Central America, is also grown and exported from several Southeast Asian countries, such as Thailand and Vietnam. Obtained from several cactus species, its succulent stem provides the uniquely delicious fruit with moisture in the arid climates where it grows.

Some dragon fruits have red or yellow skin, looking like a soft pineapple with spikes and white or red flesh. The flavour is mildly sweet, like a blend of kiwi and pear, and it has a crunchy texture.

While it may seem strange at first, it's easy to get to the fruit. Simply slice lengthwise and either scoop out the flesh, or quarter it and peel back the leathery skin. Eat only the white part with seeds, removing any residual pink parts, which are bitter. Dragon fruits have a surprising number of phytonutrients. Rich in antioxidants, they contain vitamin C, and several B vitamins.

The benefits are realised in several ways, from a strengthened immune system and faster healing of bruises and wounds to fewer respiratory problems. The seeds of dragon fruits are high in polyunsaturated fats. Lycopene, responsible for the red colour in dragon fruit, has been shown to be linked with a lower prostate cancer risk.