

Actinidia chinensis

[Synonyms : *Actinidia deliciosa*, *Actinidia sinensis*]

KIWI FRUIT is a deciduous climbing vine. Native to northern China, northern Korea, Manchuria and eastern Siberia, it has cream-white maturing to pale brownish-yellow, slightly scented flowers with golden stamens.

It is also known as *Actinidia da China* (Portuguese), *Actinidier de Chine* (French), *Actinidier à gros fruits* (French), *Aktinidia chinska* (Polish), *Aktinidiia kitaiskaia* (Russian), *Aktinidya* (Turkish), *Almindelig kiwi* (Danish), Chinese actinidia, Chinese gooseberry, Chinese gooseberry vine, *Chinesische Stachelbeere* (German), *Chinesischer Strahlengriffel* (German), *Gele kiwi* (Dutch), *Grossfrüchtige Aktinide* (German), Ichang gooseberry, *Kiui* (Japanese), *Kiiviköynnös* (Finnish), *Kínai egres* (Hungarian), *Kiui* (Japanese), *Kiui furuutsu* (Japanese), *Kivi* (Turkish), *Kiwi* (German, French, Swedish), *Kiwi-slægten* (Danish), Macaque peach, *Mi hou tao* (Chinese), Monkey peach, New Zealand fruit salad, *Oni mata tabi* (Japanese), Sheep peach, *Shina saru nashi* (Japanese), *Szörös kivi* (Hungarian), *Yangtao* (Chinese), Yellow-fleshed actinidia, and *Zong hua mi hou tao* (Chinese).

Chinensis means ‘of or from China’.

Its name Kiwi fruit seems to have sprung from commercial necessity. When New Zealand first exported kiwi fruit to the United States they were marketed as Chinese gooseberry. The Americans had been coping with the scaremongering ‘Reds under the bed’ stories of the McCarthy era following the Second World War and when market researchers came to investigate why Chinese gooseberries were being ignored they found that the name of this ‘new’ fruit had been off-putting and a new name needed to be found – kiwi fruit.

It is understood that the first European to learn of the kiwi fruit was the Scottish horticulturist, Robert Fortune (1813-1880). This was in 1845 during one of his expeditions for the Horticultural Society of London, but he only sent plant specimens home. It was not until 1900 that seeds were introduced to England by ‘Chinese Wilson’ (1876-1930) from his trip to central China on behalf of the famous nursery, Veitch and Sons. The Nursery promoted the vine and it is noted that it became popular in gardens of that period.

This vine, now cultivated commercially in several countries, has had particular success in New Zealand where the flourishing plants have been developed from parents growing in the Yangtze Valley introduced in 1910 by Chinese missionaries. Growth on a commercial scale in New Zealand began in the 1920s, but authorities believe that the fruit were first exported to the United States in 1958 when they were being called Chinese gooseberry (as already mentioned). Although it is understood that the Chico Plant Introduction Station in California received some plants decades beforehand (and some of these are still growing happily there to this day) the fruit’s potential was not recognised immediately. Apparently kiwi’s commercial cultivation only began in California in the late 1960s. (Some food historians have noted that kiwi fruit were first shipped to England in 1953.)

The egg-shaped, highly perfumed, greenish-brown fruit have been made into preserves and jams. They have also been eaten raw, and have been used in China for making wine.

The fruit have long been used in Chinese medicine as a tonic for new mothers or for children.