

Bactris gasipaes

[Synonyms : *Bactris ciliata*, *Bactris dahlgreniana*, *Bactris gasipaes* var. *gasipaes*, *Bactris insignis*, *Bactris speciosa*, *Bactris utilis*, *Guilielma chontaduro*, *Guilielma ciliata*, *Guilielma gasipaes*, *Guilielma gasipaes* var. *chontaduro*, *Guilielma gasipaes* var. *coccinea*, *Guilielma gasipaes* var. *flava*, *Guilielma gasipaes* var. *ochracea*, *Guilielma insignis*, *Guilielma microcarpa*, *Guilielma speciosa*, *Guilielma speciosa* var. *coccinea*, *Guilielma speciosa* var. *flava*, *Guilielma speciosa* var. *mitis*, *Guilielma speciosa* var. *ochracea*, *Guilielma utilis*, *Martinezia ciliata*, *Palma paripou*]

PEACH PALM is a deciduous palm. Native to tropical Central and South America (probably most particularly Amazonian Peru) it has slender ‘trunks’ (stems) banded with very sharp, black spines and reddish-yellow ripening to purple fruit.

It is also known as *Amana* (Surinamese), *Cachipay* (Colombian, Spanish), *Chonta* (Colombian, Peruvian, Spanish), *Chontaduro* (Colombian, Ecuadorian, Spanish), *Chontaruro* (Ecuadorian, Spanish), *Coeur de palmier* (French), *Gachipaes* (Spanish, Venezuelan), *Macanilla* (Venezuelan), *Masato* (Spanish), *Merepy* (Waimiri Atroari South American Indian), *Palepi* (French, French Guyana), Palm chestnut, *Palmier parépou* (French), *Palmier pêche* (French), *Palmier pejibaye* (French), *Parépou* (French, French Guyana), Peach nut, Pejebaye (Costa Rican, English), Pejibaye (Costa Rican, English, German, Spanish), Pejobaye palm, *Pewa* (Malay), *Pewa nut*, *Pfirsichpalme* (German), *Pibá* (Panamanian), *Pijiguao* (Spanish, Venezuelan), *Pijuayo* (Peruvian, Spanish), *Pupunha* (Brazilian, Portuguese), *Tao zong* (Chinese), and *Tembé* (Bolivian).

The flowers are pollinated by insects and the wind. Each palm yields 4-5 large clustered bunches of 50-300 edible, fruit annually, each cluster weighing about 25 lb. or more.

The palm presents several unusual points connected with harvesting different parts of it. For instance it is known as a ‘feather palm’ as it has a clump of stems (‘trunks’) instead of one stem (‘trunk’). This means that removal of the terminal bud or palm heart or cabbage (a sought-after delicacy not least, one wonders, because of its relative scarcity) does not destroy the whole plant as harvesting it would do from a single-stemmed palm. Then as already mentioned the stems (‘trunks’) usually bear wide bands of spines round them and these can complicate the fruit collection. If the spines are removed the palm will die so the large heavy clusters have to be knocked or cut down and caught in leaf-lined sacks by a couple of men below or allowed to fall onto a deep bed of banana (*Musa*) leaves – unless of course the palm has grown so tall that the farmer feels obliged to fell it.

It is cultivated commercially and is being grown at the turn of the 20th and 21st Centuries especially for the gourmet food market, as well as for its seed oil. The former, the vegetable delicacy obtained from other palms as well as this one, is known as Palm heart and there is now a lucrative and growing worldwide market. (Palm heart is also known as Heart of palm or Palmito.)

Archaeological finds have shown that peach palm was one of the most important palms in the American tropics. It is believed to have been in cultivation by at least 2300 BC as one of the main sources of food for many Central and South American Indian tribes (certainly in Costa Rica where remains of it have been found dating from about 2300 BC to 1700 BC). Local reliance upon peach palm has continued through the centuries to the present day.

Although significantly less now evidence of this continues to be witnessed in the everyday lives of scattered communities in Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela. The palm is a familiar sight growing around some of the Brazilian villages as well – but authorities note that it is no longer found in the wild in Costa Rica. (Perhaps it should also be mentioned that, although the fruit have been viewed by most as human food, in Colombia today it is primarily a source of animal feed.)

It seems that peach palm did not venture far from South and Central American shores until the 20th Century. Certainly the United States imported seed from Costa Rica in 1920 and the Philippines received the plant in 1924 but records suggest that its appearance in India only occurred in the 1970s.

Locally the highly versatile fruit with its sweetish yellow flesh forms a staple part of the diet. The fruit are eaten boiled as a vegetable (the latter from anything from 30 minutes to three hours in salted water to remove the poisonous elements). Also, when processed they can be added roasted or added whole to soup or stews. Today in Costa Rica the boiled fruit are sold as snacks on street corners. The processed and dried fruit are ground into flour as well, both for baking and for thickening dishes. (Some consideration is now being given to the viability of producing the flour commercially for use in confectionery and breads.) In the past the fruit were also dried and preserved for use out of season.

Apart from this the Tucano Indians of Brazil make an alcoholic drink from the fermented fruit. This alcohol, which is actually prepared in many countries in the region, is known by various names for instance *pejibaye* or regionally in Amazonia as *mazato* – and promotion of it on a wider commercial scale is also being considered. The sap is fermented for wine.

The palm heart offers a vegetable for salads or stews – and the residue left after its removal from one of the stems can be used in various ways. For example it can be used as a vegetable to make soup or to provide an alternative to bamboo shoots.

As an alternative to palm heart however Amazonians pick young shoots and eat them fresh, alone or in salads. Young flowers have also been chopped and used as an omelette flavouring and the cooked seeds (although viewed by some as too hard and indigestible) have been eaten like chestnuts.

Both the fruit wall and the coconut-flavoured white kernel (seed) contain edible oil – and after the oil has been extracted from the former the residue is also edible by humans and animals. The seed oil has been used locally for cooking. It is similar to coconut oil (*Cocos nucifera*) and can be referred to as Oil of Macanilla.

If that were not enough the palm is also the source of a salt. It is understood that this has been extracted from the base of the spadix (the flower spike) by the Yurumanqui Indian tribe about whom there seem to be few records.

Parrots, not least the macaws, seem to be particularly partial to these fruit. Recent research has also been assessing the possibility of using dried, processed fruit as an alternative feed to maize (*Zea*) or sorghum (*Sorghum bicolor*) for livestock in the tropics, especially poultry and pigs.

The long black spines from the palm's trunk provided some South American Indian tribes, especially those in Brazil, with needles for tattooing their skin with soot.

Young leaves yield a green dye applied by the Ticuna Indian tribe in Colombia as decoration on bark cloth.

Some South American Indian tribes, such as the Chácobo in Bolivia, used the wood to make their hunting bows and arrow heads – and it has also been used locally for building. While the Boruca tribe have used this palm to make their fire sticks. The wood has also been made into staffs and walking sticks, as well as various small items like spindles used for weaving. The trunks (stems) when split have also served as water troughs.

Still today some South American Indian tribes in Ecuador and Colombia celebrate the fruit harvest with festivals.

In more recent times the peach palm has been cultivated as a shade tree on coffee (*Coffea*) and cocoa (*Theobroma cacao*) plantations.

Medicinally, peach palm has provided a local treatment for headaches and stomach upsets.