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Diospyros lotus

[Synonyms : *Diospyros canomoi*]

DATE PLUM is a deciduous tree. Native to temperate eastern Asia (particularly the Philippines and parts of China), it has tomato-like, white-frosted pleasant-tasting, purplish-black fruit.

It is also known as *Amlok* (Hindi), *Caqui* (Spanish), *Cây* (Vietnamese), *Dattelpflaume* (German), *False lotus tree*, *Faux lotier* (French), *Guayacán africano* (Spanish), *Guiaca* (Portuguese), *Guiacana* (Portuguese), *Guyac de Tadone* (French), *Hei zao* (Chinese), *Hog plum*, *Jun qian zi* (Chinese), *Khurma obyknovennaia* (Russian), *Lotus-diospiro* (Esperanto), *Lotus persimmon*, *Lotuspflaume* (German), *Lotuspflaumenbaum* (German), *Lotus tree*, *Mame kaki* (Japanese), *Plaqueminier faux lotier* (French), and *Tomel obečný* (Czech).

Lotus is derived from the lotus tree (*Zizyphus lotus*) with reference to the similar fruit.

This name is hardly surprising when one learns that for many authorities the date plum was ‘the lotus’ offered to Odysseus’ scouts by Homer’s Lotus-eaters in *The Odyssey*. Odysseus describes how

..... I sent
a detail ahead and soon enough
they mingled among the natives, Lotus-eaters, Lotus-eaters
who had no notion of killing my companions, not at all,
they simply gave them the lotus to taste instead
Any crewmen who ate the lotus, the honey-sweet fruit,
lost all desire to send a message back, much less return,
their only wish to linger there
..... But I brought them back, back
to the hollow ships, and streaming tears – I forced them,
hauled them under the rowing benches, lashed them fast
and shouted out commands to my other, steady comrades:
‘Quick, no time to lose, embark in the racing ships!’

Other authorities subscribe to the view that ‘the lotus’ could have been for instance the jujube (*Zizyphus jujuba*) or even the fruit of the southern nettle tree (*Celtis australis*).

The trees are particularly cultivated in eastern Asia and in Italy for their fruit. Ripe purple-black date plums are eaten fresh, dried – or bletted (when they become soft and sleepy). The fruit are often dried for Winter use in Asia.

Nobody seems to know when the trees first reached the Mediterranean but records show that date plums have been grown there for their fruit for centuries – and today they are cultivated further north in France and Germany as well. In Japan however the tree appears to have ornamental value only.

In south-eastern Asia the fruit juice can still be used today by some of the pygmy negroid peoples (Negritos) as an arrow poison for hunting and the bark has been scattered on water to stun fish.

The wood has been used for construction and general carpentry.

Medicinally, the seeds are used as a sedative in Chinese medicine. The fruit have been used in some parts of Asia to treat fever.

