

Litchi chinensis

[Synonyms : *Dimocarpus litchi*, *Euphoria litchi*, *Litchi litchi*, *Litchi sinensis*, *Nephelium litchi*]
LYCHEE (English, French) is an evergreen tree. Native from tropical China to Malaysia it has small, pale greenish-white or yellowish flowers.

It is also known as Didyma, Dragon's eye, *Ilich* (Tamil), *Kelengkeng* (Malay), *Lai chi* (Chinese), Lee chee nut, Lichee (English, French), *Lichi* (Bengali, Hindi, Malay), *Lin chi* (Thai), Litchee, Litchi (English, German, Swedish), *Litschie* (German), *Litsi* (Finnish), and *Vài* (Vietnamese).

The small knobbly, dull brown fruit become prune-like and black when dried and are then called 'litchi nuts' which have a slightly acid, very sweet raisin-like taste.

Chinensis means 'of or from China'.

For the Chinese lychees have lyrical connotations that seem to be based on the love story of Yang Kuei-fei (719-756) related by classical Chinese poets. A legendary beauty she was the Imperial Concubine of the T'ang ruler, Emperor Hsüan Tsung (685-762) who reigned from 712-756. He was forced ultimately to execute her when she and her brother were accused of far-reaching political intrigue. It is said that Yang Kuei-fei so loved lychees that her Emperor, who is said to have been infatuated with her, ordered them to be brought to the capital in five days there and back on relays of fast horses from Canton. (Once it had been harvested the lychee was said to lose its colour after one day, its scent after the second day and taste after four or five days.)

In China the fruit are often dried when they acquire a raisin-like taste. It is claimed today that the Cantonese still consider the lychee to be far more desirable than ever a peach (*Prunus persica*) or an orange (*Citrus sinensis*).

The tree provides food for the lac insect.

In 1775 lychee was introduced to Jamaica. It reached Hawaii in 1873 – and only ten years later (1883) it had appeared in Florida, and four years after that, California.

Medicinally, the seeds and leaves have been used in some parts of Asia to treat animal bites.