

Persea americana

[Synonyms : *Laurus persea*, *Persea drymifolia*, *Persea edulis*, *Persea gratissima*, *Persea gratissima* var. *macrophylla*, *Persea gratissima* var. *oblonga*, *Persea gratissima* var. *vulgaris*, *Persea leiogyna*, *Persea macrocarpa*, *Persea persea*]

AVOCADO (English, German, Swedish) is an evergreen tree. Probably native to Middle America (particularly Mexico) it has small scented, greenish-white flowers.

It is also known as *Abacate* (Portuguese), *Abacateira* (Portuguese), *Aguacate* (German), *Aguacate pear*, *Alageta* (Guamanian), *Alligator pear*, *Anakoya-pallam* (Tamil), *Apoka* (Cook Islander), *Apukado* (Malay), *Aviota* (Samoan), *Avocadopære* (Danish), *Avocado pear*, *Avocado tree*, *Avocat* (French), *Avocat blanc* (West Indian), *Avocatier* (French), *Avocato* (German), *Avocatobirne* (German), *Avoka* (Niuean, Tongan), *Avokado* (Finnish, Swedish), *Avota* (Samoan, Tahitian), *Buah mentega* (Malay), *Et-pera* (Singhalese), *Laurier-Avocatier* (French), *Mexican avocado*, *Midshipman's butter*, *Mukorobe* (Kikuyu), *Palta* (German, Spanish), *Pea* (Fijian), *Pear*, *Pereira Abacate* (Portuguese), *Pero avvocato* (Italian), *Perse ağ* (Turkish), *Persée* (French), *Poirier de Nouvelle-Grenade* (French), *Soldier's butter*, *West Indian avocado*, and *Zaboka* (Creole).

The flowers which open twice, first as a female then as a male, are attractive to bees and hover-flies.

Essential oil is extracted from the large seed.

Warning – all parts (especially the leaves) are said to be poisonous – except the ripe fruit flesh. It is poisonous for livestock.

Americana means ‘of or from America (North or South)’.

Its familiar name Avocado comes from *ahuacatl* an Aztec derivative of *ahuacacuahatl* meaning ‘testicle tree’. Some suggest the fruit acquired the name Alligator pear because of the appearance of the skin of some varieties and the pear-like shape. Midshipman's butter was a name especially familiar to English seamen who manned the sailing ships in past centuries.

Some archaeologists believe from their findings in Mexican excavations that avocado has been cultivated since about 8000 BC (others think it has been eaten since about 7000 BC and cultivated since roughly 5000 BC). In other words these highly nutritious fruit have been eaten both as a vegetable and a dessert fruit for a very, very long time. Familiar to American Indians in South and Middle America before the Europeans arrived, it is believed to have been an important part of the diet for the Aztecs in particular. In the West Indies however it was not commonplace when Europeans first landed and some authorities believe that it was only introduced to Barbados for instance in the first half of the 18th Century.

During their explorations of South America in the 16th Century the Spaniards came across the avocado tree and introduced saplings to several other countries. It is thought that a Spanish settler took the tree to the Hawaiian Islands in the early 19th Century but it was another 100 years before it became a common sight there. While a horticulturist, Henry Perrine, is held to have planted the first avocado in Florida in 1833 although its cultivation there on a commercial scale did not burgeon for another 70-odd years.

Although avocados may well have been familiar to intrepid European travellers and seamen long beforehand it was only in the 1950s that many European countries eg. Britain and France, began to import the fruit in any large numbers – no doubt encouraged by horticulturists in Florida in the United States, and in South Africa.

The glossy dark green or purplish-brown fruit are now familiar throughout the Western industrialised world and are commonly eaten in North America, Europe and Australia as a salad vegetable, but in Brazil they are often enjoyed as the main ingredient in an ice cream. One of the most familiar dishes in the West (which reflects an avocado sauce that historians know the Aztecs prepared) is *guacamole*.

Some American Indian tribes use the fruit in a pomade to encourage hair growth, while others use the big woody seeds to fashion trinkets. In Zaire in central Africa the leaves are used to make a local beer *babine* – and wherever the tree grows the toasted and ground leaves can sometimes provide a mild spice. In Europe and North America cosmetics companies include avocado oil as an ingredient in some of their products – and in some countries this oil has also been used for making soap and has been burnt for lighting.

Any oversupply of fruit in Guatemala is fed to pigs, and poultry.

Apparently in the wild it is a favourite of animals such as jaguars.

The hard seed will make an indelible, brown stain on linen. Locally (when ground and mixed with cheese) it has provided a rodent poison.

Medicinally, avocado has been used locally to treat period problems, stomach ailments and respiratory diseases (the leaves and bark). The seeds have been used as a remedy for dysentery and diarrhoea, and the fruit skins have been used to treat worms. In the Caribbean, an infusion of the leaves is taken to ease hypertension.