

Phoenix dactylifera

DATE is an evergreen palm. Native to the Persian Gulf it has white flowers.

It is also known as *Chukara* (Indian), *Dadelpalm* (Swedish), *Daktilopalmo* (Esperanto), Date palm, *Dátiles* (Spanish), *Datlovník pravý* (Czech), *Datte* (French), *Dattel* (German), *Dattelpalme* (German), *Dattero* (Italian), *Dattier* (French), Egyptian date palm, *Feniko daktila* (Esperanto), Finger apples, *Hurma ag* (Turkish), *Khajur* (Bengali, Hindi, Punjabi), *Kharjuramu* (Telugu), *Khur-mâ* (Persian), *Khurmae-yabis* (Arabic), *Kunyan* (Persian), *Palma* (Maltese, Spanish), *Palma datlová* (Czech), *Pericham* (Tamil), *Pindkhajura* (Sanskrit), *Taateli* (Finnish), *Tamr-ha-khal* (Arabic), and *Tennita* (Malayalam); and in flower language (as for all palms) is said to be a symbol of victory.

The flowers which are wind-pollinated are fragrant on male trees. (Cultivated palms are more often than not pollinated artificially.) The fruit hang in clusters of about forty strands and each strand contains about 25-35 dates.

Fibre is extracted from the leaves and leaf bases. Toddy (or juice) is extracted from incisions made in the crown of old palms, and then fermented and distilled.

Dactylifera is derived from Greek *dactylo-* (finger) and *-fer* (bearing, carrying) components meaning ‘finger-like’ with reference to the fruit.

It is thought that date was probably growing on earth as early as 50,000 BC and that it has been cultivated for about 5,000 years. Archaeologists have found cuneiform text dating back to about 2300 BC that describes how the palm has to be pollinated artificially. When the pollen is ripe the female tree is climbed and a piece of a male flower cluster is tied among the female flowers. Like the coconut palm (*Cocos nucifera*), the date palm has many, many uses and is respected accordingly. While the Babylonians used to refer to 360 (for them a mystical number), the Arab sayings suggest as many uses as there are days in the year. Some authorities note that in fact 800 uses are said to have been recorded – a phenomenal number from one plant (even if some of them are a little obscure).

There are many varieties of date palm and the fruit of only a few of them (some of which can reach six inches long) ever reach Europe and North America, this international trade representing only 20% of total production (about 492,000 tons). The types of date palm are often divided into three groups, soft, semi-dry and dry. A palm can be productive for 100 years, providing 100 lb. of date annually (each one will weigh about half an ounce). Western date connoisseurs usually prefer the less common whole, natural bunches of dates (when they are fresh and less juicy) to those most frequently retailed in fancy boxes. Apart from the 60-70% sugar content, dates also contain Vitamins A and B.

Moslem legend tells how, when Adam was expelled from the Garden of Eden, he carried wheat (*Triticum*, chief of all kinds of food), dates (chief of all fruits) and myrtle (*Myrtus communis*, chief of all sweet-scented flowers).

The small deep orange to brown fruit have been an ingredient in meat dishes for thousands of years and its expressed juice, when evaporated, has long provided a thick, honey substitute both for sweetening and for drinks. Sap from less productive palms is tapped for making palm wine, alcohol and vinegar. In India date is one of the palms from which palm sugar or jaggery is produced – and local people manage to consume or drink as much as 100,000 tons of this each year.

According to depictive carvings and written records, the nomadic people living in Arabia and North Africa have relied upon the date palm and its fruit as a primary source of food since at least 5000 BC – several thousand years before the ancient Greeks or the Romans began to import dates from Africa. Archaeologists also suspect that the date palm was growing in India in pre-Aryan times – from at least 2500 BC. From the 2nd Egyptian Dynasty date wine is mentioned in texts and this means that the ancient Egyptians were enjoying it from probably some time between 3000-2500 BC. Stones from the fruit when soaked in water not only provided food for sheep and camels but also offered a source of fuel. The fruit stones have been made into charcoal as well for silversmiths.

The trunk of the palm tree has long provided fuel, in addition to material for building, and for making household and personal objects. The latter must have accounted for many of the uses that were, and probably still are, celebrated by the Arabs..

Both the Sumerians and the Babylonians revered the date palm as sacred and for the Hebrews, who made a syrup by pressing the fruit in a punctured vessel, the palm symbolized justice and divine blessings – but their priests condemned fermentation of the juice or sap. The ancient Egyptians sang the palm tree's praises as much as their modern street-sellers do still today, and they copied it architecturally in their columns. The fermented date juice has been enjoyed since about 2000 BC. The ancient Greeks ate the fruit and used them in meat and fish sauces, as well as in cakes and pastries. Both Greeks and Romans sold dates in gilded wrapping during theatrical performances, as ice cream or confectionery would be available nowadays.

Authorities believe that the fruit could have reached England before the 11th Century – although evidence suggests that the word 'date' only entered the English language two centuries later. It is thought unlikely however that the famous English bard, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) (or most of his audiences who must have been well familiar with the fruit by then as an ingredient in pies) had ever seen the palm from which they came. Scholars note that dates are mentioned in three of Shakespeare's plays – not least *Romeo and Juliet* in which Lady Capulet asks the Nurse to fetch more spices to which she responds

They call for dates and quinces in the pastry.

In China books used to be printed from wooden blocks made of date or pear (*Pyrus*) wood. [It is interesting to note that the Chinese even in the most southern provinces do not have a suitable climate for growing the palm trees and have had to import the fruit via Persia from the time of the T'ang dynasty (618-906) to the present day.]

The date palm was introduced to Latin America by Spanish missionaries during the 18th Century and offspring of these initial palms can still be found beside Mexican missions today. Commercial cultivation of the palm in California in the United States only started at the beginning of the 20th Century yet today the harvest there is said to account for 90% of the world's cultivated dates.

Like some other plants, the date palm featured on the coinage of some of the ancient nations, among them the Carthaginians and the Jews.

Today on a commercial scale the fibre is used for baskets, cordage and ropes, and with camel hair is woven into tent cloth. Blanched leaves are used in Christian churches on Palm Sunday. The wood is used for building both huts, and houses. Distilled toddy is made into spirits, including arrack and toddy is boiled for jaggery (or palm sugar) .

Medicinally, a date paste was long respected for treating chest complaints, and a honey/date mixture was used as a remedy for colds. The fruit were included in poultices not least because their sweetness deterred bacterial decay, and they were also employed to treat fever, some venereal diseases, asthma, coughs and other respiratory ailments. The gum has also been prescribed for treating diarrhoea and various urinary disorders.