

*Prunus persica*

[Synonyms : *Amygdalus persica*, *Persica vulgaris*, *Prunus amygdalus*, *Prunus persica* var. *vulgaris*, *Prunus vulgaris*]

**PEACH** is a deciduous shrub or tree. Possibly native to northern China it has small fragrant, pale pink to white flowers.

It is also known as *Aroo* (Urdu), *Aru* (Hindi, Punjabi), *Broskvoň obecná* (Czech), *Broskyňa obyčajná* (Slovak), Common peach, *Dào* (Vietnamese), *Da tao ren* (Chinese), *Fersken* (Danish), *Hawha* (Maltese), *Hung mon* (Thai), *Kemomo* (Japanese), *Khai* (Lao), *Khawkh* (Arabic), *Khoka* (Arabic), *Makmuan* (Thai), *Mao tao* (Chinese), *Melocotonero* (Spanish), *Momo* (Japanese), Peach blossom, Peach tree, *Pêche* (French), *Pêcher* (French), *Peras* (Filipino/Tagalog), Persian apple, *Persico* (Italian), *Persico duraznero* (Spanish), *Persik* (Malaysian), *Persika* (Swedish), *Persiketräd* (Swedish), *Persikka* (Finnish), *Perzik* (Dutch), *Pesco* (Italian), *Pessegueiro* (Portuguese), *Pfirsich* (German), *Pfirsichbaum* (German), *Piichi* (Japanese), *Poksunga* (Korean), *Pürsichbaum* (German), *Seftali ag* (Turkish), *Shaft-alu* (Persian), *Tao* (Chinese), *Tao zi* (Chinese), and *Too* (Chinese); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of a bride, 'I am your captive' (blossom), season of Spring, 'your qualities, like your charms, are unequalled'.

Warning – peach fruit stones are poisonous.

*Persica* means 'of or from Persia (Iran)'.

Although the small yellow-red peaches of today are cultivated throughout the world their origins are uncertain and argument over them would appear to fall into two camps – those who believe peach is native to China, and those who contend that it was developed in the Near East from the almond (*Prunus dulcis* var. *dulcis*). Known Chinese references may go back to at least 2000 BC (some in representations on pottery and porcelain) while those in the Near East to 1500 BC. In addition authorities that subscribe to the former view also point out that Xenophon (c.435-354 BC) the Greek historian and military commander, made no mention of seeing peach trees in Persia. (In 401 BC he had been one of the Greek mercenaries employed by the Persian prince, Cyrus the Younger (424-401 BC), on the doomed attack on his older brother, Artaxerxes II Mnemon.) Authorities of that persuasion therefore muse that at that time peach trees did not grow in Persia and the Persians imported the fruit overland from hundreds of miles away in China.

Peach was the most important sacred plant for followers of the Chinese Taoist religion and was believed to be a symbol of hope and of the Tao, the way by which immortality could be achieved. In their writing the peach tree is the Tree of Life in the mythical garden paradise, bearing fruit that ripen only once in 3,000 years. Whoever is able to eat the fruit becomes immortal. Today the Chinese still consider the fruit to be a symbol of longevity and more widely in the East the blossom is always associated with marriage. It is believed that the Chinese learnt how to espalier peach trees in order to grow the best quality fruit ages before the Europeans 'discovered' the method in about the 13<sup>th</sup> Century. Chinese devotion to the cultivation of peach trees was such that they even appreciated that not only was it best for the wall supporting the guiding trellis to be facing in the warmest direction but also that it should be painted white to reflect the warmth and sunlight.

Today in China and Hong Kong peach trees are particularly cultivated for the flower trade at the Chinese New Year and for this reason any premature blossoms will be removed rapidly. Authorities note that this requires considerable skill in both cultivation and purchase in order to ensure the height of perfection of the blossoms on the New Year's Day itself – and their continued beauty through the subsequent fifteen-day celebration. Similarly in Java (now part of Indonesia) the flowers play a role in local festivals.

The ancient Egyptians are known to have had a rather sombre use for the peach. The kernels are poisonous and as a form of capital punishment convicted criminals were required to eat the ground kernels – penalty of the peach.

Alexander the Great (356-323 BC), the king of Macedonia, is said by some authorities to have introduced the peach to the ancient Greeks, a fruit that was perhaps acquired during his campaigns in Persia – if it was being cultivated there by then. (There are authorities however that claim that the peach arrived in Europe 200 years earlier.)

In Roman times the peach (although a luxury as it was imported direct from Persia) was highly regarded. According to some authorities it seems to have made its appearance in Rome in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century when Caesar Augustus (63 BC-14 AD) was in power but according to others it may have been earlier. There it was initially called *persicum malum* meaning 'Persian apple' from which the name *persica* is derived. Pliny (23-79), the Roman natural historian, tells us that several varieties were available during his lifetime and that they were very juicy and watery and promoted thirst.

The peach must have progressed further into Europe at much speed as archaeological finds in southern Germany have indicated that the tree was being cultivated there shortly after it had penetrated Italy. Despite this it seems that peaches were a scarce luxury, certainly in western Europe if not Italy for several centuries. They only began to be more accessible (occasionally making an appearance at banquets invariably as a symbol of importance) in more northern or western countries on that Continent from about the 6<sup>th</sup> Century. Peach tree cultivation was encouraged (without too much success it seems) by the king of the Franks and Christian emperor of the west, Charlemagne (747-814).

Europeans started to espalier fruit trees (although not yet against whitewashed walls as in China) in about the 13<sup>th</sup> Century and in France if nowhere else by the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, when François I (1494-1547) had gained the throne in 1515, at least 40 varieties had been named. Among these was one according to some experts that was called *téton de Venus* meaning 'Venus' nipple'. However there are others who claim that the peach so-named acquired its nickname when the fruit were being grown at Versailles one hundred years later under the expert eye of La Quintinie (1624-1691), a trained lawyer who became the much respected Steward of the Orchards and Kitchen Gardens of Louis XIV (1638-1715). A notable story of the Sun King's reign is worth mentioning here. A musketeer retired to the country and began farming. As he was lacking space he espaliered peaches against a white wall and this accidental siting rewarded him with fruit of fine quality earlier than anyone else. It was in the following reign of Louis XV (1710-1774) who succeeded his great-grandfather in 1715, that Montreuil south of Boulogne claimed vociferously that they were the inventors of the espalier technique for growing peach trees. Only later was it learnt that the Chinese had developed the system centuries beforehand.

The Spaniards are believed to have introduced the peach to Latin America in the early 16<sup>th</sup> Century and it reached the southern states of North America in the following one and quickly established itself there – so quickly in fact that it is said that by the time English colonists arrived peach trees were flourishing in the local Indian orchards as if they had originated there. For the Hopi Indians the peach (which they thought with other fruit was influenced by the owl) was much enjoyed as an important part of their diet both fresh and

dried for later use. They used the wood to make weaving batons. The Natchez in the Mississippi area were so taken with the fruit that they named one of their thirteen months after it – and it was also especially prized by the Creeks, some of the Navajo tribe (authorities suggest it was their favourite fruit) and the Seminoles. The fruit were eaten by the Cherokee and Keresan Indian tribes, and the Keresan, Havasupai and Iroquois all dried them for later use. The Iroquois also made a sauce from them and the Havasupai Indians stewed the dried and pounded fruit to make a beverage.

Apparently the Navajo Indians prepared a yellow dye from the leaves – and one or two of the tribes valued medicinal virtues variously from leaves, seeds or fruit including the Koasati. It was a treatment for fever and stomach upsets among the Cherokee, who also used it to heal some skin disorders. Both Navajo and Cherokee tribes took it as a purgative, and the Delaware and Cherokee Indians prescribed it for worms and for easing vomiting (the latter especially in Delaware children). Rappahannock Indians turned to it for curing some kidney ailments.

Perhaps the enthusiasm with which North American Indian tribes embraced the peach tree is best illustrated by the speed with which it spread through the areas favourable to its growth. The English Quaker reformer and colonialist, William Penn (1644-1718) who founded the American state of Pennsylvania, wrote in a letter to England in 1663

There are .....very good peaches, and in great quantities; not an Indian plantation without them ..... not inferior to any peach you have in England, except the Newington.

He may well have been referring to the trees cultivated in Pennsylvania by the Susquehannocks and neighbouring tribes. Peach orchards had also been appearing in the English settlements in Virginia and Massachusetts – but in due time it was to be the State of Delaware that adopted the blossom as a State emblem.

It is thought that the peach tree was not cultivated in England until 1562 after it was introduced there from the near Continent, or re-introduced there following an unexplained interval between that period and an earlier arrival. (As a surfeit of the fruit are sometimes held to be the cause of the King's death in 1216 – John Lackland's (1167-1216) misfortune or gluttony is also attributed variously to pears (*Pyrus*), peas (*Pisum sativum*), lampreys and frog's blood in ale – regardless of the accuracy of this traditional tale peaches ie. the fruit, may well have crossed to England from say France well before the 16<sup>th</sup> Century. Some historians note as well that the Tower of London acquired two peach trees in 1275 – and that they might even have been introduced long before that by the Romans if peach stones found at a 2<sup>nd</sup> Century site in London's old Billingsgate fish market could be relied upon.) Later early settlers also introduced the fruit to New Zealand and Australia in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century where it grew as successfully as in North America – but the tree's first appearance in South Africa was only made in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

Authorities versed in the works of the famous English playwright and poet, William Shakespeare (1564-1616) have noted that his references to peach only refer to the colour of the blossom – as in Part 2 of *Henry IV* for instance when Prince Henry says

.....But, indeed, these humble considerations make me out of love with my greatness. What a disgrace is it to me, to remember thy name? or to know thy face to-morrow? or to take note how many pair of silk stockings thou hast; viz. these, and those that were thy peach-colour'd ones? or to bear the inventory of thy shirts;

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In some parts of Asia a gum used locally is obtained from the stem.

Today the fruit are a commercial ingredient used by the food, drinks, toiletry and cosmetics industries.

Peach blossom is a state emblem for Delaware in the United States and was adopted in 1895. Medicinally, European herbalists recommended different parts of the peach tree for the treatment of a range of diseases and ailments including jaundice, fevers, respiratory disorders, indigestion, worms, warts, whooping-cough and the healing of wounds. It was also used as a laxative and provided yet another cure for baldness. It is the birthday flower for 25<sup>th</sup> April.