

# A Basket of Fruit

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A connoisseur's guide to some of Sri Lanka's fruits by Derrick Schokman



A market fruit stall

A familiar fruit around the world is the banana, available throughout the year in Sri Lanka. The banana is closely interwoven with Eastern mythology. When Eve was tempted in the Garden of Eden (paradise), the serpent is said to have been hidden in a bunch of bananas. Botanists were influenced accordingly and classified the banana as *musa paradisica* (fruit of paradise) or *musa sapientum* (fruit of knowledge).

Growing in a continuous cycle of life and death – no sooner one pseudostem bears a bunch and dies than another takes its place – the banana has a score or more varieties. The best are *kolikuttu* with large, fleshy, sweet, loose-skinned fruit borne in large combs. and the *embul* with straight, fragrant, sub-acid fruits. The common or garden **papaw** is digestibility itself, being the *fons et origo* of the digestive enzyme *pepsin*. Sprinkled with lime or lemon it makes an excellent breakfast fruit.

**Woodapple** is a forest fruit. Undamaged shells found along with elephant droppings gave rise to the belief that the elephant's gastric juices were strong enough to extract the pulp through the pores of the shell without cracking it. This belief was exposed when it was shown that a butterfly, *virachola isocrates*, laid its eggs on the fruit and the larvae entered through the pores to feast on the pulp.



Tasting the delicious Mangosteen

While still serving as a delicacy for the wild elephant, woodapple has gained distinction as a dessert fruit par excellence when prepared and served as a cream or mousse. The odd mixture of sweet and sour is remarkably attractive.

Among the indigenous fruits of Sri Lanka, the mango is undoubtedly the king of fruits today, as it was the fruit of kings in bygone times. The kings' planted mango trees in their pleasure gardens. They used the ripe fruits as votive offerings to the sacred tooth relic so highly did they value this fruit. Travellers passing through this country five and six centuries ago, liked mango well enough to write about it, referring to its "excellent fragrance and flavour" and insisting that "however many you eat you desire still to eat more." There are a wealth of varieties to feast on from the wizened *dhampara*, a mere mouthful, to the giant-sized *pol amba*, a meal in itself.

Do not try to experience all or most of them in your short stay here. Ask for *karutha colomban* and you won't go wrong, for it is the undisputed king of mangoes in this country. Green-skinned but taking on a yellow red colour when ripe, it is sweet-tasting with a deep orange-coloured flesh. At the same time, do not look down your nose at the small *Willard* mango which acquires an attractive crimson blush on one side of its purplish-green skin. The fibreless flesh is reddish-yellow and JUICY. There are also several naturalized exotics, many of them introduced by the Dutch about 300 years ago from the Malay archipelago. Of these, **mangosteen** may be considered the ne *plus ultra*. It has been referred to as "perfumed snow" and called "the ambrosia of the Homeric gods." You will agree once you have tasted the ethereal quality of the white segments of fruit lying pearlwise within the purple shell. **Pineapple** comes next. No more exquisite enjoyment can be imagined than the chilled fragrant flesh and abundant juice of this fruit, especially the golden *Mauritius*. The larger emerald Kew, often measuring 45-50cm without its spiky top knot, is a little more acid and more suitable for canning.



Then there is the controversial durian, that perplexing prince of fruits! For some the mere smell of the outer covering suffices: they hasten to get away as fast as

possible from the unbearable, ineffable gusts that assail their nostrils. For the brave, who are willing to lay bare the odoriferous outworks for the creamy white blanchmange-like pulp that lies within, it can be the “culmination of delights.”

And, of course, we cannot forget the avocado, the food of the ancient Mayas, Aztecs and Incas of Latin America. It is still much sought after as a savoury, although Sri Lankans tend to eat it as a sweet with milk and sugar. When the dull green speckly rind, sometimes purple, is cut at its equator so as to remove the disproportionately large stone, it reveals two cups filled to a depth of about 1.5 cm with a yellowgreen nutty butter.

Nutritionally avocado is something special. It contains 11 vitamins, 14 minerals and for a fruit, plenty of protein. The carbohydrate content is low, and although the flesh is rich in oil, there is no cholesterol. There are also the anonas with their sugary white flesh deliquescent amid countless black shining seeds. Pre-eminent is the spiky sour sop, yielding first class “fool” and “ice.”

When in season, an interesting variant of the common course of fruits is the hairy rambutan, or “the odd vegetable sea urchins” as some western writers have called them. An Englishman, unfamiliar with the art of extracting the fleshy seed from the skin, referred to the process as an exciting form of tiddly-winks.

“You squeeze the hairy coat,” he wrote, “until it bursts and lets jump at an unknown angle (therein the excitement) a grape-sized fruit, pearly-white, but carrying weight and way because of the stone.” Last but not least is the passion fruit. It is the only creeper fruit, apart from the odd grapevine, that is of economic importance. The fruits, mostly yellow, are the source of one of the finest cordials put on the market.