Enter the Dragon: savour the Sweetness

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SRI LANKA
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A ripe Dragon Fruit with its forbidding exterior

You might be thrown off by its tough flaky exterior, but slice into it and you will discover a mellow centre waiting to be relished.

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara **Photographs** Indika De Silva

Dragon Fruit, a fitting name for this exotic fruit finds its origins in South and Central America. However, the fruit is grown commercially in many Asian countries such as Cambodia and Thailand and in recent times in Sri Lanka as well. Today Dragon Fruit is gradually making its presence known amongst the tropical favourites of locals.

In Sri Lanka, Dragon Fruit can be cultivated in the low country wet zone, intermediate zone and the dry zone. A member of the cactus family, the plant can prevail the dry climes of irrigated lands. Amongst the places of the dry zone that cultivate Dragon Fruit is the Na Sevana farm in Meegahajadura, Sooriyawewa. Model farms that include a host of agricultural and medicinal crops have been introduced as a part of the Na Sevana Community Development Programme – an initiative of the Gangaramaya Temple and Namal Rajapaksa, MP. An expanse of approximately half an acre of Dragon Fruit plants grown here yield 30 kilos in one harvest and these cacti plants take up to a year to bear fruit.

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The plants are tethered to a support, in this instance concrete columns are preferred for their durability over wooden ones, as the plants can be sustained for as long as 40 years. Each column can support two or four plants, where the former arrangement is found to be more fruitful in cultivation. The branches of the plants are allowed to cascade over to all sides, which is further believed to facilitate yielding of fruit. While the fruits arise from the newly pruned branches the plants are trimmed to a manageable height for ease of harvesting. An individual fruit that springs from the flower, can weigh up to 600 grams and is usually sold at 400 rupees a kilo in the market.

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During the time of harvesting the plants look bejewelled with the crimson fruits that appear forbidding, complete with a touch of the exotic that can be attributed to its intense shape and colour. These ripened fruits are plucked while the tips of the scales are green and in time turn red when they reach the markets in Colombo. While the fruit still remains a luxury consumer good in Sri Lanka, where production remains at a small scale, with the growing interest due in part to its health benefits, commercial cultivation is on the rise. It is believed that Dragon Fruit packs a punch where health benefits are concerned particularly for its remedial effects on diabetes for which it has earned repute amongst consumers.

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Benefits aside, the fruit does offer mouthfuls of goodness. Slice into it and inside is a rich velvety surprise. Of the three varieties; red-skinned with white flesh, red skinned with red flesh and the yellow-skinned variety, only the red-skinned varieties have been introduced to Sri Lanka. Dip a spoon into the luxuriant core and discover a sweet and mellow flavour that belies its exterior. The soft texture is delightfully peppered with the gentle crunch of the fruit’s tiny seeds. Each bite is a thirst quencher with water being the fruit’s major constituent.

The fruits grown in the dry zone are markedly sweeter for its higher sugar content and all the more enjoyable. The red-core variety though no different in taste to the white, is however more popular and one could imagine why at a glance as its rich colour is in a word, irresistible. While fruits are best enjoyed in its fresh and raw form, Dragon Fruit can be utilised in a variety of preparations, such as jam, ice cream, jelly and fruit juice.

The Dragon Fruit plant can even be housed as an ornamental plant. Regardless of its alternative uses, there’s nothing like relishing its smooth velvety textured, subtle sweetness!