

Fruits of the Wild

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Fresh and plump Wild Delum with a shiny coat

The tiny stalls that line the Lunugamvehera - Sella Kataragama road are humble in appearance. But within these makeshift kiosks, you can find the most unexpected treasures, such as wild delum, weli atha and numerous varieties of fresh fruits and vegetables.

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Driving through the Sri Lankan dry zone is an experience that never loses its novelty. Smoothly carpeted roads are replaced by unpaved tracks and relatively rough terrain while the highway is under construction. The tall, luscious trees of the wet zone give way to scrub forests and the monotony is broken periodically by houses or the occasional stall.

These stalls that sell fruits and vegetables are part and parcel of the scenery. Stall owners may change, but the gracious smiles that adorn the faces of the vendors, and the fresh produce they sell remain unchanged.

It was one of these vendors that encouraged us to stop our vehicle. Standing at the side of the road, a hat protecting her head from the glare of the sun, she held in her hands several pomegranates and netted custard apples, colloquially known as delum and weli atha respectively.



The soft white flesh of Custard Apple

We had observed gardens where pomegranate and netted custard apple trees thrived before this point. Several trees seemed to have sprung magically in the middle of the shrubbery, away from residences. Both pomegranate and custard apple trees have short tree trunks and thin branches covered by hundreds of tiny leaves, and are perfectly suited to survive the heat of the dry zone.

These delum trees bore fruits with a yellow husk, where as the imported pomegranates found in Colombo are of a red hue. Once we pulled over at the stall, we discovered yet another difference; the arils of these fruits were pastel in colour with just a hint of pink, widely different from the dark red that can be seen when the husk is removed from the imported variety.

Yellow-green in colour, the netted custard apple takes the form of a slightly ovoid sphere. While its husk looks tough, with ridges breaking its surface, the white flesh inside belies this initial impression.

Pomegranates and netted custard apples you buy from these roadside stalls are often home-grown or plucked from wild trees. The arid climate of the dry-zone promotes the growth of the trees and it is easy to spot one or two wild delum or weli atha trees among the shrubbery. Even in a garden, weli atha requires far less attention than the delum tree. A simply thrown seed may grow into a plant that begins to bear flowers within six to seven months, whereas a delum tree demands more commitment from a gardener.



Shades of juicy, pink pearl seeds of a pomegranate

If left unattended, delum as well as weli atha trees begin to bear fruits in September, once the dry zone's rainy season brings relief from the heat. However, an adequate amount of fruits can be obtained throughout the year by regular maintenance in the form of daily watering and manure.

Rich in several nutrients including Vitamin C, K and fibre, the antioxidant as well as anti-viral properties of pomegranates promote effective blood circulation and

provide relief against ailments such as stomach disorders, anaemia and high blood pressure.

Netted custard apples' anti-inflammatory, analgesic properties can combat illnesses such as dysentery, diarrhoea, and fever. Rich in vitamin C, B, potassium, fibre, iron, protein and other nutrients, netted custard apples are also mostly recommended by Ayurveda medicine as a remedy against ailments such as skin diseases.



Makeshift kiosks that line the Lunugamvehera - Sella Kataragama road

Sold alongside the delum, weli atha, sugarcane, water melon and other vegetables were bananas. These are largely purchased not to be consumed, but to be offered to the giants on the road.

Once you pass Sella Kataragama and move along the Buttala road, you enter the territory of the elephants. Motorists who use this road purchase some fruits from a roadside stall to give to the elephants that occasionally come out on to the road. For a small gift, these gentle giants that block the road would move aside, triumphantly holding the spoils of their efforts in their trunks and let the vehicles move along.

Unfortunately, we did not encounter any wildlife as we moved towards Sri Lanka's east coast. It was on our way back to Colombo that we were lucky enough to come across a solitary elephant, at that moment accepting a small bundle of fruits from a vehicle. Several partly consumed fruits and vegetables lying abandoned on or by the road at different locations told the story of fellow travellers who had presented these offerings to the elephants.

Man or elephant the harvests of the wild are bound to entice as you travel along this resplendent route.

