



Mangoes that grow in abundance in every region of balmy Sri Lanka



Streets lined with neatly-arranged piles of green fruit; knives slicing cleanly into the golden pulp within; school children and walkers-by thronging at the little kiosks; salt and chilli powder sprinkled nuggets being popped into salivating mouths. It's that glorious time of year again - it's mango season!

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Cutting into a ripe, juicy mango is perhaps one of the most tantalising tasks for the compulsive mango-addict. The thick, fibrous flesh hugs the blade causing the distinctively

mouthwatering sound of a succulent mango being cut. As the golden pulp within comes into view, red-yellow juice drips from the fruit and the sweet, heady scent is intoxicating. The most satisfying way to eat a mango is to suck the pulp off the skin. Chewing into the flesh, the sweet-sour flavour, the soft, fibrous texture and the honey-sweet fragrance combine for that perfect fruity treat. Flavours, textures and fragrances vary, depending on the type of mango and how ripe it is, ensuring a unique experience with every fruit.

Mango trees thrive in the dry and wet zones of Sri Lanka and are a popular feature in home gardens, be they in cities or rural provinces. Growing ripe around the month of May, the green skins turn a vibrant orange-yellow indicating they are “ready to eat”. The fruits are so commonly found in the Island that they are a favourite among Sri Lankans. The snack-sized mango is ideal for beating the heat, owing to its juicy texture and hydrating properties. Children love mangoes for their sweet flavour and also for the flat seed found in the middle of larger mangoes. The seeds are ideal for using as stones during a game of hopscotch, or *batta* as it is called locally. Those with a penchant for tangy flavours find pleasure in raw pickled mangoes, infused with chilli powder, salt and a dash of vinegar. Most Sri Lankans hold fond childhood memories of relishing little bags full of *amba achcharu*, or pickled mangoes, bought from vendors, who strategically station themselves outside schools.

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Perhaps the most sought after variety is the Karuthakolamban, famed for its hefty size – some weighing as much as 500g – and sweet flavour. Although grown in the dry zone areas such as Polonnaruwa and Vavuniya, the Jaffna Karuthakolamban is said to be the best in flavour. Vellaicolomban, another large variety, grows in the wet zone. Willard tends to take on a purplish tinge when it ripens. Gira Amba and Malwana are two medium sized varieties and Dampara and Peterprasand, are two smaller types of Sri Lankan mangoes. □Mee Amba is the smallest; its flesh is so soft that, instead of being cut up into pieces like other varieties, the pulp is sucked out through the skin of whole fruits.

In addition to being a yummy treat, mangoes are also packed with nutrients. Rich in Vitamins C and A, carbohydrates, phosphorus and calcium, mangoes are regarded to have several medicinal properties. Ripe and unripe mangoes, the seeds, leaves and bark are used to treat various illnesses. Eating ripe mangoes helps diminish night blindness and it also maintains healthy, glowing skin. Various stomach ailments and blood related illnesses can be overcome by eating unripe mangoes. They also encourage bile formation.

Mangoes also lend their range of flavours to various desserts, preserves and curries. Ice-

cream flavoured with mango is a favourite frozen treat among Sri Lankans for its refreshing chill and the well-liked flavour. No Sri Lankan fruit salad is ever really complete without generous chunks of golden mango. The high water content of the fruit makes mango juice the ultimate restorative on a hot day. The fruit is also enjoyed with the traditional Sri Lankan rice and curry, either in the form of a fiery chutney (a type of preserve) or simply as a mango curry. Chopped into halves or quarters, the unripe fruit including the seed is cooked with onions, green chillies, chilli powder, salt, saffron and jaggery or sugar to taste. There may be nothing more satisfying than sucking the sweet, sour, zesty, salty flesh off the seed of a mango curried this way.

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Owing to their long history in the country, mangoes hold a large presence throughout the culture of Sri Lanka. Even the name of Sri Lanka's capital, Colombo, is believed to have been derived from the mango. According to certain accounts, the Sinhala name of the region of Colombo was *Kola Amba Thota*, meaning "Harbour with leafy mango trees". In 1505 when the Portuguese first named the area 'Colombo', it is believed that the word was an adaptation of the Sinhala name, which alluded to the presence of mango trees in Colombo.

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The fruit has also made its mark on the Sinhala language, lending it the phrase, *amba yahaluwo*, used to describe best friends. In essence, if people are called "mango friends", it means they are loyal and inseparable. The story goes that the term came into being when a group of children walking home from school spotted a single ripe mango dangling from a tree. The tightly-knit group insisted on sharing the single fruit, so that none would go without. This is the quality of the friendship between "mango friends".

The pleasant, cheerful feelings induced by the flavours of mangoes are certainly reminiscent of being in the company of steadfast friends. And this mango season most Sri Lankans will certainly relish the deliciously satisfying feeling of spending quality time with their 'mango' friends!

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