

Florida Food Fare

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Longans

Often called Dragon's Eye, the longan is a tropical fruit rare to this area but available in limited quantities during July and August. This native Southeast Asian fruit is similar in taste and texture to lychees. Longans, *Euphoria langana*, grow in clusters, and are round varying in diameter from 3/4 inch to 1 1/2 inches, with a thin brown shell. Inside is a translucent white, juicy-soft pulp that surrounds a single large black seed. The perfumy flavor is delicate and sweet. The thicker the pulp, the juicier, more fragrant, and crisp the pulp becomes. Longans do not ripen off the tree and maturity is judged by the particular shape, skin color and flavor of each cultivar.

The longan is grown in several Asian countries. It is Thailand's greatest fruit export and is also widely grown in China and Taiwan. It is also grown in Australia, Mexico, Israel, Hawaii, and the southern parts of California and Florida. Longans were introduced into Florida from southern China by the United States Department of Agriculture in 1903 and have flourished in a few locations but never became popular. In 1954, William Whitman of Miami introduced a superior variety of longan, the Kohala, from Hawaii. It began to bear in 1958. The fruit is large for the species, the seed is small, and the flesh is aromatic, sweet and spicy.

A seedling planting and selection program was started in 1962 at the USDA Subtropical Horticulture Research Unit in Miami. They found that a seemingly unending string of hot, sunny days produces an ideal environment for growing tropical and subtropical fruit at the southern tip of Florida. Two unusual tropical fruits - lychee and longan - are now important commercial crops in South Florida.

This tree makes an excellent specimen or shade tree for southern Florida with dense, dark green foliage and is certainly worth consideration for its landscape value. The attractive evergreen can become a very large tree, erect, up to 30 or

40 feet in height and 45 feet in width, with a rough-barked trunk. It thrives much better on higher ground than the lychee and endures more frost. The longan's range in Florida extends north to Tampa on the west coast and to Merritt Island on the east coast.

Since the fruit is similar to the lychee but matures later, the longan can be useful for extending the season for fruit of this type. The longan can be used in the same ways as the lychee and can substitute for it in various recipes. In Oriental countries longans are mainly a eat-out-of-hand fruit. It responds favorably to freezing, and can be frozen in its skin in airtight containers. Upon thawing, the fruit can be used in the same ways as freshly picked fruit. In addition, the fruit can be dried in the same way as the lychee or it can be peeled and pitted, then stewed or canned. Preserved or dried longans are considered by some to be superior to preserved or dried lychees.

Fresh longans occasionally can be found in Asian markets during July and August. They may be refrigerated in a plastic bag for up to three weeks. The easy-to-peel shell must be removed before eating. Dried and canned longans are available year-round.

Longans are eaten as a snack and used in some Asian soups, sweet-and-sour dishes and desserts. At room temperature, longans remain in good condition for several days. Because of the firmer rind, the fruit is less perishable than the lychee. Preliminary tests in Florida indicate that the fruit can be frozen and will not break down as quickly as the lychee when thawed.

Longans are higher in protein than most fruits. A half-cup serving or 100 grams of fresh longans contains 61 calories, 82g water, 1g protein, 0.1g fat, 15.8g carbohydrates, 0.4 g fiber, 10mg calcium, 42mg phosphorus, 1.2mg iron and 6mg ascorbic acid (vitamin C).

Recipes:

Asian fruit salad with papaya-mint sauce

1/2 large pineapple, peeled, cored, cut into 1/2-inch pieces (about 2 cups)	1/2 large cantaloupe, peeled, seeded, cut into 1/2-inch pieces (about 2 cups)
1 medium papaya, peeled, seeded, cut into 1/2-inch pieces (about 1 cup)	1 cup peeled whole longans, halved lengthwise and seeded
1/2 cup seedless green grapes, halved	1/2 cup seedless red grapes, halved

Papaya-mint sauce:

1 large papaya, peeled, seeded, coarsely chopped (about 1 1/2 cups)	1 1/2 tablespoons coarsely chopped fresh mint
4 tablespoons sugar	3 tablespoons fresh lime juice

Garnish:

1/2 cup sweetened shredded or flaked coconut, toasted	Fresh mint sprigs
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Mix first 6 ingredients in large bowl. (Can be made 4 hours ahead. Cover; chill.)
Spoon fruit into 6 small bowls or goblets.

Papaya-mint sauce: Puree all ingredients in processor until smooth. Transfer to bowl. Cover and refrigerate until ready to use. Makes about 1 cup. Drizzle over fruit. Sprinkle with coconut. Garnish with mint. Serves 6.