

SAPODILLA

MANILKARA ZAPOTA



Sub-Tropical Fruit Club of Queensland

Images Bill Fox

IMAGINE a fruit that could successfully compete with lollies and processed sweets for the attention of children's tastebuds. Sapodilla is such a fruit and all kids who eat properly ripened fruit relish them, describing the taste as being like melted brown sugar or caramel – tasty and good for children to eat. In fact, there is a varietal name for Sapodilla called 'Brown Sugar'; known in the Bahamas as 'Sugardilly'. Adults adore them too and appreciate a fresh fruit similar in flavour, texture and eating quality to a premium pear poached in sugar syrup.

One of the most interesting and desirable of all tropical fruit trees, the Sapodilla, a member of the family Sapotaceae, is a fairly slow growing, elegant long lived tree that can ultimately reach 18m if left to grow unmanaged in an open position. It originates from Central America where the latex sap of the tree was originally sourced as the base for chewing gum. The tree is wind resistant and drought and soil salinity tolerant.

Its 8cm long leaves are ornamental, evergreen, glossy and spirally clustered at the tips of the forked twigs. Flowers are small and bell-shaped with 3 light brown outer sepals borne on slender stalks at the leaf bases.

The fruit may be nearly round to conical varying from 5-10cm in width and weigh between 75-200gms. When immature the fruit is hard, gummy and very astringent. Although smooth skinned it is coated with sandy brown scurf until fully ripe, somewhat resembling a kiwi fruit. The flesh varies in colour from yellowish to light or dark brown. The fruit contain 2 to 12 black seeds with one white margin. They are easily removed which is just as well as they have a distinct curved hook on one end.

The Sapodilla is a hardy tree with mature trees withstanding minus 3°C and several degrees of frost for short periods. However, tender young trees can be killed by 0°C or frost. It is best suited to tropical, subtropical or warm temperate region, seemingly at home in both humid and dry climates. It grows naturally in limestone soils but it flourishes in deep loose clay >>

or sandy loam with good drainage as the tree performs poorly in wet soil conditions. Trees require fertilising three times a year (March, August and October) in equal applications with a preference for organic products with added potash rather than chemical types. It is beneficial to apply an annual addition of dolomite or ground limestone under the mulch after harvesting.

Grafted varietal selections should be grown in preference to seedlings as they will bear proven quality fruit on smaller compact trees at 2 to 5 years from planting out. Grafted trees can be maintained at around 4m with selected pruning after harvest. Prune only 20% of the tree by selecting whole branches that will give the shape you require and limit tree height. It is a mistake to prune all over or tip prune as this will restrict flowering and fruiting. There are 40 year old trees in existence that are only 4m high.

Sapodilla trees are amazingly pest free except for scale and attendant sooty mould which can be overcome with organic oil sprays. Ripening fruit can be attacked by fruit fly and flying

foxes but this is not generally a problem when picked at the correct 'hard' stage of maturity.

Selected grafted varieties are:

'Sawo Manila' – Cultivar from the Philippines that is medium size and very sweet.

'Krasuey' – Cultivar from Thailand with heavy crops of small, very sweet fruit and a good pollinator particularly for 'Martin'.

'Martin' – Florida introduction with good crops of medium to large fruit of excellent flavour on smallish trees.

'Brown Sugar' – Florida introduction with regular high yielding crops of good quality sugary fruit.

'Prolific' – Florida selection with round large fruit that bears early, heavily and consistently.

'Pondeosa' – Philippine variety that bears heavily with medium to large sweet (slightly grainy) fruit.

WHEN IS FRUIT RIPE?

Most people find it difficult to tell when a Sapodilla is ready to pick. It is necessary to rub the scurf (fur on the skin) to see if it loosens readily and then scratch the fruit to make sure the skin is not green beneath the scurf. If the scratched skin is brown and the fruit separates easily from the stem without a lot of latex, it is fully mature though still hard and must be kept at room temperature for a few days to soften. It should be eaten when firm-soft and not mushy.

SAPODILLA ICE CREAM

Ingredients:

2 cups Sapodilla puree

½ cup milk

¼ cup raw (or refined) sugar

1 teaspoon of lemon juice

1 cup whipped cream

Preparation:

Mix pureed sapodilla with milk, sugar and lemon juice.

Fold in whipped cream and freeze.

While technically self-pollinating, trees are much more productive if two different varieties are planted adjacent to one another. Tree spacing is best at 4m apart with 6m row spacing.

Fruit mature anywhere between 4 and 9 months after fruit set and in the tropics some cultivars bear almost continuously. In the subtropical and warm temperate areas the main harvest period is early autumn and mid-spring depending on the variety.

Generally the soft-ripe sapodilla is chilled and served cut in half as a fresh fruit dessert which is eaten with a spoon. It is an ideal dessert fruit as the skin, which is not eaten, remains firm enough to serve as a shell. Its soft, melting flesh may be scooped out and added to fruit salads or compotes. It is delicious when mixed with orange juice and topped with cream.

The fruit being high in calories (1 calorie per gram) is a natural source of energy that is much better than the refined sugar within lollies and candy. It is also a very good source of fibre, phosphorous and Vitamin C.

As it is unusual to see Sapodillas in supermarkets and fruit shops, why not grow your own in the backyard so you and your friends can enjoy the luxury of eating this superbly sweet fruit as a nutritional dessert that is actually good for you.

STG

