

Gardeners at home, garden show have questions

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office

The 24th Galveston Home and Garden Show was held last weekend at the Galveston Island Convention Center.

Thirty-two Texas Master Gardeners with the Galveston County AgriLife Extension Office staff the informational booths. They distributed publications and plenty of visitors came by to ask plenty of gardening questions.

The following is a sampling of the questions we received.

There were several questions on palm trees, including if fruits produced by palms were edible. Master Gardener O.J. Miller addressed this question as he is a palm enthusiast with considerable hands-on growing experience. O.J. Provided the following sage advice:

The fruit produced by palm trees is known as a date. The fruits from the Jelly or Pindo Palm (*Butia capitata*) are edible and usually easier to reach on the tree than the true date palm (*Phoenix dactylifera*).

Fruit produced by the true date palm goes through four distinct stages of maturity. The first set of fruit produced on a tree can remain attached to a tree for up to a year.

Fruit on a true date palm then begin to ripen and, in the Galveston-Houston area, should be picked at this stage.

If fruit is not picked at that stage, it falls already fer-



PHOTO BY Dr. William M. Johnson

True date palms are commonly grown in local commercial and residential landscapes. The fruits produced by true date palms are coveted for their sweetness and commercially grown for sale at grocery stores and other food outlets.

mented and rot quickly because of our high humidity and the sugar content of the fruit. It becomes impossible to obtain fresh dates.

Since dried dates require very dry conditions during the last stages of maturation, harvesting high quality dates can be challenging.

Also, the female trees need a pollinator in order to produce acceptable sized fruit, and since their pollen doesn't move easily, most dates are hand-pollinated. The fruits are up to 40 feet in the air so they are not easy to harvest.

Many of the varieties of the true date palm were imported from Iraq, but imports fell off after the fall of Saddam.

There are numerous true date palms in medians all across our area, including areas along NASA Road 1.

There is an impressive planting of true date palms that many Galvestonians and most visitors view everyday.

These true date palms (*Phoenix dactylifera*) can be found growing within the street median dividing 61st Street on Galveston Island as travelers exit off the Gulf Freeway.

Most of these date palms were produced on date plantations in California and Arizona, which since have closed.

Several cultivars or varieties of true date palms have been developed, including Me-



March 14, 2012



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News column printed in the Galveston Daily News, The Post, and other Galveston County Newspapers.



jhool, Zahidi and Deglet Noor, still are commonly grown in Southern California.

Commercial growers dig up the trees, fold up and tie the fronds and ship them for landscape planting. Date palms are beautiful with the leaf scars on the trunk of the tree and the full, round crown of fronds certainly provides a tropical and exotic setting.

Fruit of date palms grown in the California growing area are what consumers would commonly purchase in local grocery stores.

Interestingly, most of the tall palms that line the median along Broadway in Galveston are commonly known as Washington palms or sometimes as Washingtonias.

Their botanical name is *Washingtonia filifera* although some might be hybrids.

Many island residents familiar with these palms along Broadway also know them to be salt-tolerant from the flooding by Hurricane Ike.

Residents also are likely to be familiar with the clusters of striking flowers produced around early spring and the bright yellow fruits that come afterward.

The fruits add a touch of color on the greenish tone of the leaves and on the brown color of the trunk. The fruits are typically hard and dry and tend to not to be edible.

Miller will be presenting a seminar of "Growing Palms" in Galveston County 9 a.m. April 21 at the Galveston County AgriLife Extension Office. Details will be provided in a later column.

A variety of questions were asked by visitors to the Home and Garden Show about growing tomatoes. To the rescue came Terry Cuclis, another Master Gardener with considerable experience in growing tomatoes, especially heirlooms.

One question asked was, "What heirloom tomatoes will best withstand our hot weather?" Terry drew from his hands-on experience in answering that question.

For a standard size heirloom tomato fruit his recommendation was Aker's Oxheart, which is an indeterminate and very productive variety. Aker's Oxheart has a slightly acidic taste similar to the popular hybrid variety Celebrity.

He also recommended an heirloom variety known as Siberia for gardeners desiring a red cherry tomato. Siberia is determinate and very productive with fruits slightly larger than a golf ball and five to six fruits per cluster. This variety has a very good complex with a semisweet taste.

Maas Nursery in Seabrook offers a selection of heirloom tomato plants. Mercer Arboretum normally offers heirloom plants at their annual spring plant sale.

Siberia transplants would be more difficult to find but seeds can be obtained from Seed Savers Exchange and other specialty sources.

As you can see, Master Gardeners bring a wealth of knowledge and hands-on experience they willingly share with local gardeners.

The next time you meet a Master Gardener, please give them a thank you for their service to our community residents.

