

Christopher Coumbus is credited with the discovery of what tropical fruit?



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The Market Stand: PINEAPPLE **Family: Bromeliaceae Genus: Ananas comosus**

The earliest European record of the pineapple was by Peter Martyr who stated that Christopher Columbus saw it being cultivated on Guadeloupe Island in 1493. The Spaniards named it la pina due to its resemblance to the pine cone. It was one of the firsts New World plants to reach the Old World. This was possible because an uprooted plant can survive for months without soil. In Florida native members of this family, the Bromeliads, are called air plants for their seeming ability to survive on air alone. The leaves of many species of this group have a thick cuticle that retards dissociation. These leaves also possess specialized tissues for storing water. This suitability to xeroscopic conditions allows their cultivation in semiarid lands such as Hawaii.

Hawaii once led the world in production of canned pineapple but labor costs have now shifted much of that production to the Third World.

In our markets the pineapple is the most ubiquitous of canned tropical fruits. It is available in a wide variety of forms: juiced, crushed, sliced, and cut in many sizes. The quality of the canned fruit rivals that of fresh fruit because they are packed ripe for canning and unripe for fresh eating. Ripe fruit does not ship well.

The fruit contains practically no starch. Its sugar content is derived from starch in the stem that is transferred to the fruit, most of which takes place just prior to complete ripeness when the fruit may nearly double its sugar concentration. Hence, an unripe pineapple can ripen further only to a limited extent owing to the small amount of the stem that remains at the core of the fruit.

Many people have described a fully ripe pineapple as the most delicious of all fruits; certainly it is among them. The best one I ever ate I grew myself. Part of that wonderful experience was the enjoyment of the exquisite, rich aroma of the ripe fruit, it perfumed my entire house. In all honesty, though, I have grown some that were less memorable and very acid.

I like to grow pineapples for several reasons. They are attractive, especially when in bloom or when holding fruits which they can do for 3-6 months. Their size lends itself to container culture affording easy protection from cold (damaged at 32°F, killed at 28°F) and nematodes. They grow and produce fruit in semi shade, something I have an abundance of. They are

relatively free of pests & diseases. And finally they are easy to propagate.

Many people know that a pineapple plant can be started from the fruit crown. Additionally, their vegetative propagation may be accomplished from a variety of plant parts: off-shoots that arise from different areas along the stem usually after fruiting - called slips if near the fruit, and shoots, suckers or ratoons if further down the stem; or stem pieces during any stage of their life cycle. Sexual reproduction is possible but seeds are rare and difficult to germinate. Hummingbirds are thought to be their primary pollinator. Hand pollination is practiced for cross breeding. Flower/fruit production time varies with starting material and cultural methods; a general range is 15-32 months. In Florida it could happen in any season. Gassing can be employed when plants are at least 15 months old to stimulate flowering - it is a process whereby ethylene forming chemicals are applied. Plant hormones may also be used. A field grown plant will self-propagate for many years eventually forming a clump of cloned progeny, although mutations can occur. In practice, however field culture requires the thinning of all offshoots save one basal shoot (a shoot arising from the stem or stolen beneath the soil) which is allowed to remain to produce the next crop; this process is repeated for 3+ years until fruit quality declines. The plant is then removed and the ground reworked with soil amendments and fumigants before being replanted.

Pineapple plants like well drained soil, organic matter and a pH of 4.5 - 6.5. Adequate fertilization is necessary for good fruit size and quality; added magnesium appears to help. Avoid contaminating the growing bud with fertilizer or sand as this will likely damage or kill the plant. Organic matter such as coffee grinds or cottonseed meal can be placed in the bud to prevent this. Irrigation should not exceed 1" semi monthly. Pineapples can make the most of a light rain shower or morning dew due to their physical form, a rosette of stiff, trough shaped leaves that direct water toward the center of the plant and its roots. Mealy bugs, spider mites, nematodes and various diseases are their enemies but most can be easily controlled.

Pineapples are a fair source of Vitamin C. The fruit and stem contains the proteolytic enzyme bromelain that has many commercial uses (e. g., meat tenderizer). For that reason raw pineapple should never be added to gelatin, a protein, as it will prevent it from setting properly. This is true for papayas and several other fruits.

The pineapple has many culinary uses: in baked goods, salads, sauces, preserves, candied and in main dishes. Unripe pineapples are unpalatable and poisonous. The pineapple with crown intact is very ornamental and often used to adorn gift baskets and table settings. Its image is artistically portrayed on homes, buildings, furniture and other household articles - a practice derived from early times in Caribbean cultures where it signified friendship and hospitality. Why not discover the pleasure of growing pineapples in your yard?

- **Thom Scott**

