

Flora & Fauna in Spain

Date Palm

Date Palms, you see them everywhere, tall and majestic with those orangey, bronzy, yellowy fruits hanging down.

They were brought here, to Spain, from the Middle East and Africa by the Arabs, and in turn taken by the Spanish to the Americas. Dates are probably one of the world's oldest foods! They have formed a staple part of Arabic diets since the beginning of time itself. There is evidence of their cultivation in Arabia since 6000 BC. It is thought that they were originally found in northern Iraq



and, in fact before Saddam Hussein stopped them, date cultivation was essential to the economy of Iraq. The Sumerians were the earliest cultivators of dates, they were also the first people to create the written word, invent the wheel and develop laws.

The trees grow to approximately 15-20m tall, the leaves are 3 - 5m long with spines, the fruit is called a drupe, known as a date. Dates range in colour from bright red to bright yellow depending on the variety, they contain a single seed. There are separate female and male plants, and can be grown from a single seed. Naturally wind pollinated, however modern plantations pollinate manually by skilled workers who climb the trees or use large ladders. The date is a cousin of the lily, orchid and grass family's and it takes 4 to 7 years after planting before they bear fruit. They prefer their feet in the water and their head in the sun, that is why you will see them around oasis, with little rainfall but sufficient underground water supply. Gathering the crop has been modernised also by use of cherry pickers, however in many parts of the world they are still cut by hand and shaken into buckets.

The dates ripen in four stages, unripe, full size crunchy, ripe, and ripe sun dried. A 100gram portion of fresh dates is premium source of vitamin C; however during the drying process the vitamin is lost.

The date fruits are versatile and can be eaten dried, soft or can be pitted and stuffed with fillings such as cream cheese, marzipan or almonds, pitted they are, chopped and used in various sweet and savoury dishes. They can also be made in to non alcoholic wine; this is drunk in Muslim countries at Ramadan and other special occasions. In Sahara areas dried dates are fed to horses, camels and dogs and can be ground down and mixed with grain and fed to stock.

Young leaves are also cooked and eaten as a vegetable, as well as the bud or heart - however when this is removed it kills the palm. In times of scarcity the seeds are ground and mixed with flour to make bread. None of the plant is wasted even the flowers can be eaten with salads; the sap is converted to

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palm sugar. Seeds are used as well in soap and cosmetics, also as an additive in coffee, and burned to make charcoal. Stripped fruit clusters are used as brooms, the wood for posts and rafters of houses. In Pakistan they make thick syrup from the ripe fruit and use this as a coating for leather bags and pipes to prevent leaks.

The leaves of the palm are used for making huts and in the Christian religion they are used on Palm Sunday. So this is a multi purpose plant, which due to the high tannin content the fruits are used also in medicine to treat intestinal troubles, sore throats, cold and many other complaints.