

Tastes of Thailand - Thai Fruit

Thailand is a cornucopia of exotic produce, growing some of the worlds most refreshing and delicious fruit.

Due to Thailand's climate, tropical in the south and more temperate in the north, and its rich soil, a wide range of fruit is available year round. Sweet, juicy, and healthy Thai fruit is exported fresh, frozen, canned, dried, preserved, and as juice. Americans can find it in one or more of these forms at their favorite grocery store or Asian market.



Following is a guide to the luscious fruits of Thailand.



Mangosteen: Revered as the “Queen of Thai Fruits,” mangosteen is a small, round fruit with a thick, reddish-purple shell encasing five-to-six succulent, tangy, white segments. Valued for its refreshing and rejuvenating properties, mangosteen is high in potassium and contains vitamins B and C, calcium, magnesium, and traces of iron and zinc. The inedible purple skin, rich in anti-oxidants, is used to treat skin problems. Legend has it that Queen Victoria offered a knighthood to anyone who could bring her a mangosteen in prime condition. Fresh Thai mangosteens may be hard to find on American shelves, but the canned form is available at your local Asian market.

Durian: Despite its rich, sweet, creamy, golden flesh, the “King of Thai Fruits” is best known for its pungent aroma. Food writers say durian is an acquired taste. To reach the enticingly addictive flesh of this football-sized fruit, carefully break through the strong exterior, studded with sharp thorns, ignoring the strong odor. An increasingly popular way to eat durian is as fried, crunchy, chips. It also is available in paste form, cream cookies, and ice cream. This richly nutritious fruit is full of carbohydrates, protein, iron, calcium, niacin, and vitamins C and B.



Rambutan: Instantly recognizable by its bright red, hairy skin, the exotic rambutan is popular throughout Thailand and other countries of Southeast Asia. The thin skin is easy to cut open, revealing inside an egg-shaped, white, textured flesh that is deliciously sweet. Similar in taste to the lychee, Rambutans can be a healthy dessert, snack, or breakfast. Low in calories (6 rambutans are only 50 calories), rambutans contain vitamin C, carbohydrates, calcium, phosphorus, and niacin and reputedly help beautify the skin. If you can't find fresh Thai rambutans, enjoy it canned, as juice, or as a freeze-dried snack year round.

Pomelo: This large citrus fruit can weigh more than 20 pounds. Inside its thick, yellow-green peel, are sweet segments of fruit. A refreshing, low-calorie fruit, pomelo is an excellent source of vitamins A, B, and C, calcium, phosphorus, and dietary fiber. Look for peeled, ready-to-eat pomelo in high-tech packages or in juice. Chilled in syrup, pomelo makes a refreshing dessert, and it is an important ingredient in Thai spicy rice (*khao yam*). Pomelo creates the sweet and sour taste of Thai-style salads and is a key ingredient in pomelo salad, *Yam Som Ao*.





Mango: Renowned for their juicy, aromatic, and delightfully sweet taste. Thai mangoes are enjoyed as a simple dessert fruit or with “sticky” (glutinous) rice when they are ripe, yellow and sweet. When young, green, and sour, mangoes are dipped in a sweet sauce of salt, sugar and crushed chili or in a savory chili dip of caramelized palm sugar and fish sauce. The many varieties of Thai mangoes are rich in calcium, phosphorus, vitamins A and B, and beta-carotene and reportedly are good for digestion and a healthy complexion. While Thai mangoes are delicious fresh, they also are available as juice, preserved as sweets, pickles, tangy jam, and in sweet chutney sauce.

Candied or dried mangoes are increasingly popular as snack. Some dried mangoes are lightly coated with chili powder to add some spark.

Longan: This popular fruit is known as “dragon eyes” because it resembles an eye when shelled. The translucent, soft, flesh surrounds a large, black seed. Both the longan and its relative the lychee have been grown in Southeast Asia for 1,000 years. The sweet, rich fruit is enjoyed chilled as a dessert, in fruit salads, or as a flavorful addition to many dishes, including soups and in a sticky rice pudding made from coconut milk. Thai longans are delicious, whether fresh, canned in syrup, preserved, dried like raisins as a sweet snack, or made into juice, and are a source of calcium, phosphorus, iron, carbohydrates, and vitamin C.



Lychee: Extremely sweet, but with a touch of sourness, the exotic lychees are in demand worldwide and are one of Thailand’s leading economic crops. About the size of a large grape, they have a rough, bright red skin surrounding juicy, white flesh. Lychees are rich in vitamins C, B1, and B2, as well as phosphorus, niacin, and carbohydrates, and in addition to being enjoyed fresh, they are popular as juices and wines and in flavored cocktails. Available fresh only once a year in Thailand, lychees may be enjoyed throughout the year when canned in syrup, dried as a sweet snack, or processed into a fragrant juice or light, fruity wine. Try this delicious and exotic fruit canned or fresh, with vanilla ice cream.



Pineapple: Thais enjoy the yellow, succulent, fibrous flesh of fresh pineapples as a dessert and as an accompaniment to other food. When the sweet and sour pineapple tastes too tart, Thais dip sections into a dry salt and sugar mixture. Famous for their thirst-quenching properties, pineapples are rich in vitamins A and C, calcium, phosphorus, dietary fiber, and bromelian enzyme, which aids digestion. Pineapples also reportedly cool the body, help fight colds, and lower blood pressure. Thailand is one of the world’s largest suppliers of canned pineapples and pineapple juice. Enjoy fresh pineapple for dessert, as a jam, dried as snack, and in many dishes such as sweet and sour and curried dishes.





Banana: While Thailand grows many varieties of the world's most popular fruit, from finger size to long tubes, it has only two types – the sweet, flavorful fruit eaten fresh, and the harder plantains used for cooking. An abundant source of energy and easily digestible, bananas are rich in vitamin A, calcium, phosphorus, and potassium.

Banana snack products come in many forms, including banana crisps, dehydrated banana with honey, and banana chips, which come in assorted flavors, including butter, honey, and tom yam. Banana blossoms, which are available canned, often are added to such dishes as Pad Thai and rice noodle soup. Thais use banana leaves to wrap food, then grill, bake, or steam it to impart a slightly smoky flavor to the food while keeping it moist. As they are biodegradable and environmentally friendly, banana leaves may be folded into containers, such as bowls, to serve food or to package food.

Coconut: Native coconut palms grow so tall in Thailand, that trained monkeys often are used to pick the fruit. The green outer husk of the young coconut is removed and the shrink-wrapped white shell shipped to the United States and other markets. Drill a hole in the young coconut's shell and insert a straw to sip the refreshingly sweet juice inside -- perfect for quenching thirst and cooling the body, especially after a spicy meal. Coconut juice is a natural energy drink. In Thailand, pregnant women drink coconut juice to help ease delivery, while menopausal women drink it for natural hormone replacement. Cut open the shell to scrape out the soft, succulent, translucent flesh inside. Some cooks use coconut juice and young coconut flesh in the popular Tom Yam Soup.



Flesh from mature fruit is used to make cream and milk, a base for many Thai soups and desserts, or dried and grated for baking. Coconut meat is a refreshing addition to vegetable or fruit salad, to ice cream, and to desserts when sprinkled over them. In Thailand, coconut candied coconut is a popular snack in Thailand. Loaded with calcium, phosphorus, potassium, and vitamin B2, coconuts aid digestion. Coconut milk may replace dairy products for those who are lactose intolerant. U.S. grocers and Asian markets sell a wide range of packaged and canned coconut products, and some carry fresh, young Thai coconuts.

Tamarind: An excellent source of protein, carbohydrates, phosphorus, calcium, niacin, and vitamin C, tamarinds are sold fresh in major U.S. grocery stores. Tamarind juice, pulp, dehydrated, sauce, and candy also are available in markets. Encased in a brown shell, fresh tamarinds look like long peanuts or fat broad bean pods. Crack the shell, then draw out the flesh and remove the vein. To avoid hitting the seed inside, lightly bite into the flesh, which tastes similar to a date -- sweet and slightly sour. Thais enjoy tamarind as snacks and dessert but eat it in moderation, as tamarinds can act as a mild laxative.

Thai tamarinds are fleshier than their Mexican counterparts and much sweeter. Tamarind pulp, concentrate, and juice add a fruity, sour flavor with just a hint of sweetness to sauces, soups, curries, salads, desserts, and drinks. For example, tamarind juice is an essential ingredient in some versions of *Tom Kah Gai* (chicken and coconut milk soup) and in *Pad Thai* (stir-fried noodles). Tamarind is a key ingredient in Worcestershire sauce. Tamarind extracts traditionally have been added to body lotions, soaps, face masks, and lip balms because they soften the skin.





Papaya: One of Thailand's most popular fruits, papaya has a soft and sweet flesh colored deep salmon-pink. An enzyme found in papaya is used to tenderize meat. Found in many cuisines around the world, papaya is served fresh, sprinkled with lemon juice to enhance its sweetness, and also used in jams, fruit juices, and salads. Thai dried papaya – either sweetened or naturally sweet -- is a popular and healthy snack. Eat it out of the bag, lightly sprinkled with sugar and chili powder, or add to fruitcakes, yogurt, or cereal instead of raisins. Carbohydrates, calcium, phosphorus, dietary fiber, and vitamins A, B, and C are found in papaya, which also has been found to aid digestion and relieve pain.

Guava is another of the most popular Thai fruits for snacks. Rich in vitamin C and B2, potassium, and dietary fiber, guava is sweet with a slight tart aftertaste. Sometimes called the Bangkok Apple, guava has a texture similar to an apple. The peeled flesh usually is white, although it may be yellow or even bright red. Look for Thai guava juice or canned guava at an Asian market. Mix guava juice into cocktails, fruit punch, or ice cream sodas. For a touch of sweetness, add canned guava to fruit or green salads, cakes, puddings, fruit pies, sauces, ice cream, or relishes. Guava also makes delicious jam and jelly, which some American chefs use to create glazes for poultry and meat dishes.

