

Unusual fruits, vegetables and herbs ripe for discovery

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As an ethnobotanist and avid foodie, or one who is interested in how different groups of people use plants, particularly for food, I have been intrigued lately by the unusual fruits, vegetables and herbs that have been appearing in seed catalogs, grocery stores and restaurants.

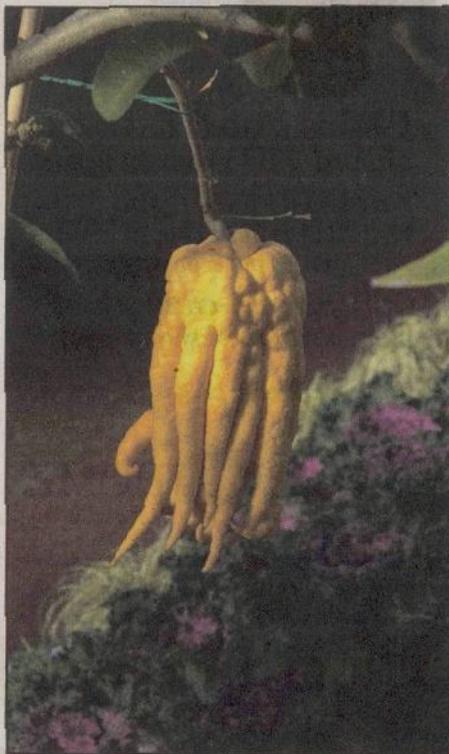
Last week I had a fish that I have not eaten before, ono (aka wahoo from Hawai'i), served in a kaffir lime-coconut foam. Delicious! I grow kaffir lime, *Citrus hystrix* in my "Encyclopedia of Herbs" (Timber Press, 2009), also known as makrut. It has leaves scented of citronella, and I've used it in Indonesian and Thai dishes, particularly curries, but I never thought to use it in a coconut milk with fish. It is easily grown as a houseplant but prone to scale infestations.

My seed catalogs have been piling up, and many different herbs and vegetables are now becoming more and more common. The lemon- and cinnamon-scented basil is especially good in a simple sugar syrup for melons and other fruits. This year, I vow to grow "Chioggia" beets that have alternating rings of red and white. I've eaten but never grown Florence fennel as a vegetable, but this year I hope that it will be in my garden, too; "Fino" is particularly recommended. "Redventure" celery, with reddish stalks, looks interesting. I've also ordered seeds for carrots in deep purple and yellow.

My big experiment this year is grafting unusual and heritage tomatoes. These tomatoes have intriguing tastes and appearances (black, striped, corrugated, etc.) but do not have good disease resistance. Thus, the "Tomato Underground" (my term for tomato growers with far more experience than me) recommends grafting these tomatoes onto disease-resistant tomatoes, and tiny plastic clips are sold for this very purpose in some garden catalogs.

Probably the most unusual fruit that I

Garden Tales



Submitted photo

Buddha's Hand, Buddha's Hand citron, or Fingered citron (*Citrus medica* var. *sarcodactylis*) is a fragrant citron variety whose fruit is segmented into finger-like sections

have seen this season jumped out to me the other day at a grocery store near Annapolis, Md.: Buddha's Hand citron. There it was, appearing as some sort of science fiction alien, with no name or price, but I immediately knew it as an old friend that I had seen in a friend's greenhouse in Texas. I grow a relative, the Etrog citron, that is used the Jewish celebration of Sukkot (along with palm, myrtle and willow), so

that helped me to recognize it. Buddha's Hand citron is almost entirely peel and pith and is used primarily for the production of candied citron peel.

However, it can be used in Asian cooking and to prepare an intriguing citron vodka. Wikipedia has a good description and a link to some recipes on the web if you run across this intriguing citrus fruit.

Editor's note: On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call 302-857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost) to arrange a tour of the herbarium, and call 302-857-6408 (Dr. Arthur Tucker) for more information about this article.