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The Indonesia Issue

77 Years after David Fairchild's famed *Cheng Ho* expedition,
we return to the island nation to continue his legacy



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Indebted to Indonesia: Growing Fruit from Far-off Lands

Text and photos by Kenneth Setzer

We owe quite a bit to plant explorers who have introduced new food to our tables after exploring the Indonesian Archipelago and the entire Indo-Malay Peninsula. That region, a Mecca for plant explorers and naturalists for centuries, has added much to our previously more-limited Western diets.

PREVIOUS PAGE
Piles of rambutan
for sale in New York
City's Chinatown.
Fifty cents each,
no picking!

BELOW
The mangosteen,
queen of tropical
fruits

While some Asian fruits have become more common here, many remain exotic and hard to find due to difficulties growing or shipping them, or because of hesitation on our part to try novel foods. But there are many Southeast Asian fruits we can grow for ourselves.

We've got longan, golden apple, Malay apple, rambutan, starfruit, durian and others to choose from. One Southeast Asian fruit in particular was beloved by Dr. David Fairchild: the mangosteen, *Garcinia mangostana*. Not closely related to mango, it's actually in a completely different plant family. Mangosteen prefers at least about 50 inches of rain annually, which South Florida can provide, along with subtropical quantities of sun.

The Ping-Pong ball-sized purply fruit contain six to eight translucent white segments similar to an orange; each may contain a seed. The taste has been described as a wild combination of tropical fruit, but I have noted it as tasting like a "buttery kiwi."

Mangosteen has the reputation of being truly tropical and very cold-sensitive. Yet, in the monumental "Five Decades with Tropical Fruit," by William F. Whitman (for whom Fairchild's William F. Whitman Tropical Fruit Pavilion is named), a grower in Taiwan—which has a climate similar to South Florida's—noted that mangosteens remained unaffected even during evening chills of 30 F, while breadfruit and durian were killed. Other reports, however, noted that even brief low temperatures eventually proved lethal to mangosteens.

Can it be our soil? Mangosteens seem to dislike limestone and prefer loam, a humusy mixture of sand and clay. This can be remedied to a degree, if you're willing to replace native soil to a good depth. Because it has a long and delicate taproot, container growing is not likely to work for long, and because of the taproot, mangosteens are difficult to transplant. This may all seem discouraging, but for the ambitious fruit lover, let it be a challenge.



Now on to easier fruit. Carambola (*Averrhoa carambola*), aka starfruit, is likely native to Indonesia and surrounding regions. This pretty, compact tree fruits prodigiously and grows throughout tropical America, the Caribbean and South Florida. It's a sun worshipper and loves plenty of rain; soil type isn't critical, but swampy conditions are best avoided. Carambola may flower and fruit throughout the year. Underripe fruit are bitter; ripe fruit are golden and taste mildly of apples. Serve slices of starfruit to your out-of-town guests to blow their minds.

A close relative of starfruit is bilimbi (*Averrhoa bilimbi*). Also tolerant of our soil, the bilimbi is not commonly cultivated. It's a bit cold-sensitive, but Fairchild's thrives outdoors near its carambola cousin. Bilimbi stays about 10 feet to 12 feet tall, and fruits cauliflorously (from the trunk) in clusters of bright green cylinder-shaped fruit. They taste intensely tart. Remember cartoons where the victim was fed alum to shrink its mouth from the bitterness? That's bilimbi, raw. In Asia it is cooked into Sayur Asem soup, among other dishes.

Rambutan (also mentioned by Whitman as thriving in Taiwan) is also likely too cold-sensitive to be grown in Florida. The fruit looks like a red, tentacled sea creature; the translucent white, delicious, mildly nutty meat is within. Rambutan is easy to find in local Asian markets.

Golden apple, or ambarella (*Spondias cytherea*) thrives as a dwarf variety tree at Fairchild. It fruits without fail and is noted as requiring little care. Its round fruit mature to a golden brown. The sample I tried was underripe and fairly bland, but in general they should mature to be a little tart to sweet. It's incorporated into all kinds of Asian and Caribbean cooking. Fairchild's grows outdoors under full sun and doesn't even flinch at limestone soil.

Malay apple and rose apple (*Syzygium malaccense* and *S. aqueum*) thrive as an espaliered tunnel outdoors at Fairchild, and I have seen them fruit. The espalier is a great strategy for growing fruit in a limited or unusual space.

Now, like a garden running out of space, I must conclude. And I haven't even gotten started on the stinky durian fruit, which my colleague tells me tastes like heaven. 