

The Lychee in Florida

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The lychee or litchi (*Litchi chinensis*) is a subtropical fruit believed to be native to southern China, where it has been cultivated for thousands of years. It is reported to have fruited in Florida as early as 1883. Yet twenty years ago, a lychee tree was still a rarity in Florida. The few trees scattered over the southern part of the state were mainly specimen trees planted on estates and in home gardens.

Fig. 1. Fruiting branch of Brewster lychee.



Photo—J. J. Steinmetz

During the past decade an orchard containing about a thousand trees was established and brought into bearing near Laurel, Florida. In addition, a few small plantings have recently been made in southern Florida, varying in size from $\frac{1}{2}$ acre to 20 acres. Numerous recent articles about the lychee appearing locally, and the favorable reaction of people who have sampled the fruit, seem to have stimulated the demand for trees from nurseries propagating it.

For many years the dried fruits, referred to as lychee "nuts," have been shipped from China to those cities in the United States having sizeable Chinese-American communities. The dried lychee "nut" can be described as having the consistency and flavor of a raisin. In its fresh form, the lychee fruit, with its sweet, yet slightly subacid flavor and pleasing fragrance, is rated as choice. It can be quick frozen and canned as well as dried. The Florida grown lychee crop is marketed mainly in the fresh form, among the Chinese people living in this country, who are willing to pay up to \$1.50 a pound in order to obtain this favored fruit. Much of the fruit is shipped in containers direct to the consumer or wholesaled in

packages containing one pound or less.

Botany

The lychee, *Litchi chinensis* Sonn., is the most important of a number of fruit tree species belonging to the family *Sapindaceae*, which are native to southern Asia.

It makes a medium to large, much branched tree, 40 or more feet in height. The alternate pinnate leathery leaves have usually five to seven opposite or alternate leaflets $2\frac{1}{2}$ to 8 inches long and 1 to $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches wide. The inflorescence is a terminal panicle up to a foot in length. Its greenish white flowers are apetalous, with four to five dentate sepals, six to ten stamens, and a hairy-celled ovary. The flowers are either pistillate or staminate, both on the same tree. Mature fruiting panicles contain up to several dozen fruits, each of which occurs either singly or paired with an undeveloped fruit.

The mature fruit, depending on variety, may be round to ovate in shape and variable in size up to $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches in diameter. The thin leathery shell or pericarp of the ripe fruit, which is bright red in color in most varieties, presents a striking contrast to the deep lustrous green foliar background. The pericarp is rough in appearance, its surface being covered with more or

less angular or conical protuberances. Beneath the shell and completely surrounding the seed is the edible aril or pulp which is translucent, pearl white in color, and not unlike the consistency of a *Vinifera* grape in texture. The single, oblong, shiny, chestnut brown seed is attached at the base to the aril. In many fruits the seed fails to develop fully, the shrivelled abortive seed comprising but a small portion of the whole fruit.

Varieties

Groff describes and lists 49 varieties of lychee from the province of Kwangtung, China, and refers to Ts'ai Hsiang's treatise on the lychee as saying there are a thousand varieties. The only well tested variety now available in Florida is sold under the name "Brewster" lychee or "Royal Chen."

Fig. 2. Bearing Brewster lychee at Lychee Orchards, Laurel, Florida.



Photo—J. J. Steinmetz