



PITAHAYA PRODUCTION and MARKETING CONSIDERATIONS

**Pitahaya Production Seminar & Pitahaya
Festival & Research Field Day**

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SITE SELECTION

- In general, pitahayas grow well where Hass avocados grow
 - Frost free tropical/subtropical environment
 - Survive freezing temperatures for short periods
- They should be planted in full sun for optimal fruit production
- They adapt to various types of soils as long as drainage is not an issue
- They like soils high in organic matter

PROPAGATION

- Cuttings is most preferred method for commercial plantings
 - use mature wood
 - 12 to 18 inch cuttings are ideal if rooting them before planting, longer cuttings preferred if direct planting
 - May fruit after one year post transplant
- Seed germinates readily
 - great potential for breeding program
 - Slow grower, may take up to 6 years to fruit
- **Grafting is possible, but benefits not quite clear yet!**

PLANTING

- Rooted cuttings most commonly used, but direct planting is possible
 - Rooted cuttings may produce fruit in one year
- Spring/early summer planting preferred
- Must protect plant from rodents if present:
 - plant in a gopher or chicken wire basket or pots if gophers are a problem
 - Fencing may be needed to keep for rabbits may be needed if they are present
- Protect young plants from the sun

SPACING & DENSITY

- Plant spacing depends on production system and trellis used
 - 6 by 10 feet spacing common with single post trellis (@ 726 plant/acre)
 - 4 by 6 observed in California & reported in Spain on bench-type trellis
 - 2 by 10 and 3 by 8 seen on wire trellis in commercial plantings and our field trials
- **Spacing & density depends on trellis system and plant structure desired!**

IRRIGATION/WATERING

- Pitahayas can survive with minimal water but they require quite a bit of water for successful fruit production
- Excessive watering in poorly drained soils can be disastrous
- Can grow with as little as 1 gal/plant/week depending on soil type
- Dry periods are needed to induce bloom, cut back in water applied in the Spring

TRELLISING

- Pitahayas need trellis or support structures
- Type of trellis determined desired plan structure, variety and location
- Different types used in producing areas
 - Anything that can support a plant can be used
 - Live tutors used in Central America, but not an option for SD because of water cost
 - Concrete posts used in Southeast Asia
 - Combination of metal pipes and treated posts used in San Diego

Single Post (with or w/o “T”)



Ladder Type Trellis



Wire/Hedge Type Trellis



SINGLE POST & WIRE TRELLIS



PRUNING

- Pruning will depend on trellis/support system, variety, location, goals and desired plant structure
- Three basic strategies or goals for pruning:
 - **Training:** usually prune to encourage upright growth during first year
 - **Sanitation:** removal of dead or diseased stems
 - **Thinning:** to improve air circulation and exposure to sunlight

FERTILIZATION

- Fertilizer requirements of pitahaya not well understood yet.
 - 0.25 lbs/plant every 2 months in first year with gradual increases to 0.75 – 1 lb/plant of complete formula in year 4 is recommended in Florida. (Crane and Balerdi)
 - 100 lbs/acre/year active material or 4 oz/plant/quarter of 20-20-20, and substitute 4 ounces of slow release triple 14 plus minor elements for the Spring application
- According to local growers pitahayas respond quite well to foliar fertilization

FLOWERING/FRUITING

- Flowering usually starts in the Spring, in late April and intensifies in June
 - Flowering can be induced with water stress
- It takes about 20-21 days from bud break to bloom, and about 40 days from bloom to harvest
- Flowers bloom at night and remain viable for one night only

FLOWERING/FRUITING



POLLINATION

- Night blooming cactus, large flowers, some with strong scent
- Pollinized by moths and bats in Central America; mostly bees in Southern CA.
- Research emphasis on on self fruitful or self pollinating clones
- Hand pollination improves fruit set and fruit size considerably, highly recommended!
- **Most important issue with Dragon Fruit...self-fertility, self-pollination, self-sterility, self-compatibility**

POLLINATION

- Hylocereus pollen can be stored for long periods of time in a household freezer if moisture content reduced to within 5-10 %
- Temperatures below 0 Celsius should be used for long term storage
- Pollen storage can help ensure yields in commercial orchards
- Critical for breeding efforts because crossing could be made regardless of the flowering period

Metz, et. al. 2000



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PEST/DISEASES

- **Gophers, squirrels, and rabbits** can feed on and kill plants and be significant problem.
- **Birds feed on fruits** - reduce marketable yield
- Cactus **scale** a problem in the greenhouse but not in the field
- **Ants, aphids and snails** can cause problems, damage young shoots and flower buds
- No major diseases/pathogens identified yet (disease like symptoms usually physiological)
- Weeds can be a problem, increase prodn costs
- Cactus virus X isolated from samples

RODENTS

(Gophers, Squirrels and Rabbits)

- **Gophers**

- Feed on roots, but damage not visible until plants begin to decline and eventually die
- Gopher/chicken wire baskets needed to prevent damage
- Trapping a successful control, but requires an ongoing effort

- **Rabbits**

- feed on the plants and may eventually kill young plants
- Rabbit fencing may be required to exclude them
- Not usually a problem for mature plants

- **Ground Squirrels**

- They do not feed on or cause direct damage to the plants
- They burrow at base of plants and may damage root system or expose roots to the sun

Gophers and Other Rodents



Gophers and Other Rodents



APHIDS & ANTS



BIRDS

- Most important economic pest of pitahayas in Southern California
- They cause significant market losses by direct feeding on mature fruits
- They splatter seeds on neighboring fruits while feeding, thus increasing packing and marketing costs
- They perch on plants which may represent a food safety risk
- Netting or other mgt practice is a **MUST!!**

BIRDS



HARVEST/HANDLING

- It takes an average of 40 days for the fruit to develop and mature
- Harvest & handling is critical to preserve fruit internal quality and external appeal
- Must pay attention to variety differences when picking & storing
- Fruit stored at 10-12 C and 85-90 % HR has a shelf life of 2-3 weeks (Cantwell)

PACKING/MARKETING

- Few handlers/packers available, may have to pack on your own
- Most buyers want fruit commercially packed in 6, 10, and 20 lb. boxes.
- Market preference for colored flesh varieties, over \$ 1.00 more per pound
- Most imports from Vietnam(white fleshed varieties), Nicaragua(red fleshed varieties)
- Florida and California only domestic producing states
- Quality, flavor, local...our selling points!

PACKING/MARKETING



Pitahaya Market & Price Info

- USDA-AMS Market Report calls everything “Red Pitaya” but refers to skin color, no indication about flesh color.
- www.usda.ams
 - Market News
 - Fruit Vegetables and Specialty Crops
 - Market News Portal – Fruits and Vegetables
 - Fruits
 - Dragon Fruit (Red Pitaya)
 - From here you can refine the report by market, date, etc.

Marketing Pitahaya or Dragon Fruit: 10 Things a Distributor Wants (Frieda's Handout)

Understand your customer's business	Labeling and Trace Back
Participate in Marketing	Food Safety and Insurance
Don't be Greedy	Quality Control
Target Dates and Yield Estimates	Pack Size & Pricing
Post-Harvest Control	Variety & Flavor

Success in agriculture depends on marketing what you grow at a profit. Do your homework, develop a business/marketing/food safety plan and spend time talking to prospective buyers or consumers!!

Economic Prospects

- Great potential as a commercial crop alternative
- Establishment costs are high and can range from \$15000-25000/per acre
- Value per acre can be significant if yield and quality are maximized (> 20,000 lbs/acre)
- Downward pressure on price will continue because of increased domestic production and import volume (\$1.50 to \$3.00/lb. farm gate prices; \$6-8 at CFMs)
- Red fleshed varieties usually sell at a higher price than white fleshed varieties (~ \$1.00/lb)
- Risky Business...BE CAUTIOUS!!

The End...Questions??

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