

It's a Miracle

A small red berry from West Africa makes a perfect pot plant for the shadehouse

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The Miracle Fruit *(Synsepalum dulcificum*) or Miraculous Berry is a small, multi-branched tree with dense foliage from the Sapotoacae family, indigenous to tropical West Africa, where it reaches a height of 2 to 5 metres. The fruit when ripe is bright red, approximately 2cm long, olive shaped and has a relatively large seed surrounded by sweet white pulp. This pulp has the ability to affect the sour receptors of the taste buds so that all sour foods taste sweet.

Suck the flesh from the berry and then eat a sour lime or lemon - a delightfully sweet experience, as many of our customers to the nursery will testify. The more sour the fruit or food or drink consumed, the sweeter it will taste. This sweetening effect lasts approximately an hour or so and the flavour of such fruits as strawberries, pineapples. grapefruit, and rhubarb are greatly enhanced when their delicate flavours, formerly masked by natural acids, are released.

The berry is still commonly eaten in West Africa, particularly by children, and it only found its way to the West in 1964 when multi-national corporations in the USA and Europe poured millions of dollars into analysing and synthesizing the flesh to use as a safe sugar substitute. The active ingredients were isolated but because of its complex nature, synthesizing the ingredient was not possible. Tests conducted showed no adverse effects on its long-term oral use. One of the most obvious benefits of the fruit is that it is essentially a non-caloric sweetener and flavour-enhancer, and additionally contains 1.9% protein. The fruit is safe to eat in quantity - the flesh off one quarter of a berry carries as much sweetening effect as the flesh of 30 berries or more! Two of the most obvious users of the fruit would be dieters and diabetics. Foods that are not normally sour are not sweetened by the Miracle Fruit, so meat, bread and similar foods are not affected.

The plant is a native of the tropical jungles of West Africa, a warm humid area almost on the equator, and thrives in these conditions. At the nursery we have had plants bearing in under 2 years, when subjected to continued warmth and humidity, with approximately 30% shade. Those growers who wish to achieve optimum results should attempt to simulate equatorial conditions - such as Cairns experiences inthewet season.
We recommend that the shrub be grown as a tub specimen in a warm sheltered spot on your patio or verandah for at least 3 to 4 years, by which time it should have reached a height of 1 to 1.5 metres and bear prolifically.

Remember that the plant will require a larger tub each time you re-pot. We recommend the plant not be re-potted until at least 20cm above the pot.

You can then decide whether you wish to plant the shrub out in your garden, under filtered sunlight, or keep it as a tub specimen. Customers wishing to grow this plant in a cool climate would have to treat it strictly as a hot-house specimen.

The shrub likes an acid soil and the addition of a quantity of peat moss is recommended. The Miracle Fruit should ideally be kept moist and fed at least every 10 days with an organic fertiliser. Fertilise a little and often with a product like Nitrosol, seaweed or fish emulsion.

Our glass-house grown shrub appears to bear continuously with a short resting period of a month or so. Excess fruit will keep quite satisfactorily in the refrigerator or may be deseeded and the pulp deep frozen.

No diseases have been observed. The only pest we have observed is scale, which should be treated by a chemical other than white oil, as white oil has caused leaf-drop.

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