

Question: How can I find a “fairy tree” recently mentioned on the Martha Stewart TV program and does it really make everything taste sweet after eating its fruit?

Answer: This question recently came into our Master Gardener call center at the Birmingham Botanical Gardens. After extensive effort by one of our Master Gardeners the question was passed along to me. I searched extensively as well and could not find a reference to a fairy tree. The questioner did tell us the plant was a small tree or bush that produced red berries. She told us the berries were edible and they had the miraculous ability to cause anything eaten for the next several minutes to taste very sweet. At that point I was beginning to question Martha Stewart’s veracity.

I am a firm believer that every question has an answer. On the other hand some people get upset when the answer is “I don’t know why don’t you ask Martha”. Thankfully, we now have the internet to help with tricky or difficult questions. Internet search engines are amazing tools and I used Google to solve part of the mystery. I went to Google and typed the phrases: “everything taste sweet” and “Martha Stewart”. The first result was an answer page on Yahoo where someone had posted the question “what is the name of the plant that makes everything taste sweet that was featured on the Martha Stewart show?” The answer posted said the plant is called “Miracle Fruit” (not fairy tree) and from there I found the scientific name. I felt proud of myself and mentioned the “Miracle Fruit” to Melanie Johns, taxonomist here at the Botanical Gardens, and she said in perfect Latin, “oh you mean *Synsepalum dulcificum*”. She then went on to give me several details about the plant and the fruit which she has grown here in the gardens conservatory in the past (she is such a “know it all”).

The rest of the mystery may never be solved. Specifically, from where did the name “fairy tree” come. I told the story of my research at the dinner table and my daughter came up with a reasonable hypothesis. She said, “I bet something was said about a “berry tree” and the person heard “fairy tree””. My daughter is no “Google” (she’s more like a “Yahoo”) but I think she may be on the right track. This likely misunderstanding reminded me of a visit I got from a young newlywed who was trying to follow her mother-in-law’s hand written recipe for her new husband’s favorite dish. She came in and said, “I have been all over town looking for a “dash pepper” and no one has even heard of this variety”. I gave her a somewhat puzzled look and asked where she found the reference to this pepper and she said it was referenced in her mother-in-law’s recipe. As a smile came across my face I asked her if she thought it possible her mother-in-law was referring to a quantity of pepper and rather than a type of pepper. The young lady’s face turned as red as if she had eaten a habanera pepper. There is always the possibility that I jumped to the wrong conclusion in both cases. If so I would appreciate you letting me know if you have any information on a “fairy tree” or a “dash pepper”. I tried the internet so there is no need to look there.

The question still remains; does the fruit really make everything sweet? Amazingly the fruit does make other foods with high acid content and a naturally sour flavor taste very sweet. The plant is not cold hardy in our area but could be grown indoors in a sunny window and even moved out in summer. There have been numerous attempts to

commercialize the Miracle fruit with little success but if anyone can cause a shift in the market it's Martha.

Scientists have isolated the glycoprotein that causes the taste modification effect but the molecule is so large it is difficult to synthesize. Therefore, all attempts at using it as a sugar substitute have largely failed. It does however work well as fresh fruit and I could not resist ordering some seed (from a source found on the internet). I will let you know how the plant does in a later article. I think it would make a great practical joke to pull on a friend. The berry itself is described as very bland but just imagine your friends' surprise when they taste your new "sweet lemon" just after eating the berry.

If you want to purchase a plant or seeds you can find them for sale on the internet when you search by the correct scientific name mentioned earlier. The plant sells from \$15 to \$30 but three seeds cost just a few bucks shipping and all. If you want a little more information you can read about the plant by going to the following web link:

www.crfg.org/pubs/ff/miraclefruit.html .