DATES

The Real Story

By: Deborah Liv Johnson

Dates are sodium-free, fat-free, cholesterol-free, and a good source of fiber. They are also packed with vitamins, minerals and anti-oxidants. And they're loaded with potassium.

For some reason, dates cannot seem to get the respect they deserve. People either love them or, well…don't. It's time to revisit the common notions about the tiny, nutrition-packed date and sample the dizzying variety available right here in the Valley.

Among the most ancient of fruits, date palms grew along the Nile as early as fifth century B.C. Date palms came to this region via Morocco and approximately 95 percent of the dates produced in the United States are grown in the Coachella Valley.

Shields Date Garden, a landmark on the border of La Quinta and Indio, is a good place to learn about the date and to sample 13 different varieties of dates. Founded in 1924 by Floyd and Bess Shields, their date farm was truly a labor of love and hard work. Mr. Shields was so enamored with the date that he frequently gave lectures about *The Romance and Sex Life of the Date*, a topic that was captured on film and runs continuously during store hours. He also developed his signature Blonde and Brunette varieties, the Blonde known for its caramel flavor.

Still wondering why you should try a date? Dates are sodium free, fat-free, cholesterol-free, and a good source of fiber. They are also packed with vitamins, minerals and antioxidants. And they're loaded with potassium — four Medjool dates contain 668 milligrams while one large banana has 487 milligrams. Also, depending on the variety of a date, some are higher in inverted sugar (glucose or fructose), making them a better choice for people who cannot tolerate sucrose.

According to Mark Goulet, General Manager, Shields Date Garden, their dates are grown without chemical fertilizers or pesticides, and they do not use preservatives. "Dates have a lot of staying power. You can freeze, and even refreeze them," says Goulet. "If they dry out, put them in a bowl on top of a plate with water and microwave them for about 20 seconds. The water will steam, rehydrating the dates."

Perhaps the most popular date is the hefty Medjool, loved for its sweet, plump texture. Eaten plain or stuffed with almonds, coconut or even cream cheese, the Medjool delivers its goods with class and sophistication. But there are many other dates from which to choose. Prefer something not-so-sweet? Drier? Tasting like honey? Good for baking? Shields offers samples of all of their dates, including: Medjool, Deglet Noor, Barhi, Blonde, Brunette, Khadrawi, Halawi, Honey, Zahidi, Khadrawi (higher inverted sugar content), and the mysterious Abbada, a black date that tastes like crème brûlée.

One final word about dates — eating a couple of your favorite dates is a healthy and very satisfying way to pacify your sweet tooth. Throw in an almond or two and you can call it a protein-laced snack. Happy munching!

Shields Date Garden, open daily from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., is located at 80-225 Highway 111 in Indio. For more information, call 760-347-0996 or visit shieldsdategarden.com

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