

Citrus appeal

New varieties, colors and textures bring a sexy look to the produce aisle

By Susan Taylor, Special to Tribune Newspapers

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Once the flannel nightgown of the fruit world, citrus has a new look. Decked out in a dazzling display of sun-drenched colors, zipper skins and food toys, citrus is the new lingerie.

As citrus season gets into full swing, grocery store produce aisles are piled high with shiny spheres of orange, yellow and green. Oranges that are salmon pink or deep red inside share shelf space with look-alike navel oranges. Small, seedless mandarins, with easy-to-peel zipper skins and adorable names like Cuties and Darlings are stacked in colorful cardboard crates and mesh bags to beckon shoppers.

Bright yellow Buddha's hands, the ancient citrus variety that has fingers but no flesh, perfumes any room in which it resides. It's showing up in the specialty produce section of some supermarkets.



"Some varieties have been around for a while, but people are rediscovering them because they can afford them," said Peter Testa, president of Testa Produce, an Illinois firm specializing in hard-to-find produce.

Among the rediscovered varieties are blood oranges, Key limes and Satsuma mandarins. In the past, these items were in short supply, available infrequently, and expensive.

Finger limes from Australia also have been around, but nobody really noticed them until recently, Testa said. The pinky-sizes finger limes are the "it" produce for chefs and others who like to play with food. The individual pockets of juice don't break when squeezed from the fruit; they look like caviar and enhance the flavor — and fun — of all kinds of dishes, including salads, main courses and desserts.

They're so new to the commercial market that their season still seems a mystery, said Richard Liebowitz, of Culinary Specialty Produce in New Jersey. Although they have a major harvest in the fall and spring, they grow year-round, he said.

Citrus was domesticated in China and India, and all varieties come from three original species: the citron, the mandarin and the pummelo, said Tracy Kahn, curator of the University of California at Riverside Citrus Variety Collection. The Washington navel orange, which came to California in 1876 from Brazil (via the USDA in Washington, hence the name), started the California citrus industry, Kahn said. The large, sweet, seedless orange remains the standard of excellence for an eating orange.

California grows most of our eating citrus and Florida most of the fruit used in juice, with the exception of grapefruit. Florida and Texas grow eating grapefruit. About 90 percent of Florida's crop goes into processing (juice), said Peter Chaires, executive director of the New Varieties Development & Management Corp. in Florida.

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For years, the citrus industry has been working to develop fruit with different flavors and sweet-tart balances that are easy to eat, seedless, and start the season earlier and end it later. Although some varieties that come to market are a deliberate cross-pollination, most are the result of chance mutations, said Etienne Rabe, vice president of horticulture at Paramount Citrus in California. The exotic Cara Cara navel, which gets a nutrition boost from the presence of lycopene, is a chance mutation from Venezuela.

"Until about five years ago, we thought that seedlessness was everything. After we did taste panels, we found out that flavor is king. Convenience is second, and moms like fruit that kids can eat without assistance," Chaires said.

According to Rabe, the number of acres of child-sized mandarins grown in California has increased from about 5,000 in 1999 to 30,000 in 2010.

With its variety of flavors, gorgeous colors, and healthful profile, citrus is easy to work into a winter diet. Use it in salads, top off fish and poultry with colorful citrus segments or translucent slices, add it at the last minute to stews, squeeze its juice into vinaigrettes, use its peel in every course, or just eat it plain.

Fairchild tangerine

Early to ripen and often sold with intact stem and leaves. A cross between a Clementine and a tangelo, Fairchilds are sweet and juicy.

Available: October through mid-January

Satsuma mandarin

Sweet-tart balance and tender flesh characterize this early mandarin, which is sometimes sold with stem and leaves.

Available: October through January

W. Murcott mandarin

Small, seedless, sweet, juicy and easy-to-peel, W. Murcotts begin their season when Clementines end and are another perfect fruit for kids

Available: February through April

Minneola tangelo

Round with a neck (a knoblike protrusion), the Minneola tangelo is a cross between a grapefruit and tangerine. It has a tangy flavor and is very juicy.

Available: Mid-December through May

Finger limes

About the size of a pinky finger, these specialty limes have individual vesicles of tart lime juice that, when bitten, pop and provide a burst of flavor. Both skin and fruit vary in color: Their thin skin is green to dark brown, and their fruit is pale green to blushing red.

Available: Two larger crops in the fall and spring, but some are harvested throughout the year.

Cara Cara orange

Cara means beloved in Italian. An intriguing salmon colored, large, seedless navel with tropical aromas and berry overtones. Lycopene gives this navel its pink color.

Available: Mid- to late-December through March

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Buddha's hand

This bright yellow fruit is an ancient mutation of the citron. It's extremely aromatic, with a fresh, sweeter floral bouquet than a lemon. Only the rind is used to flavor liquor and recipes that call for lemon zest. It also is used as a fragrant ornament, which when dried, loses its scent but retains its unique structure.

Available: November through early winter, but some continuous growth in certain regions allow them to be available at other times

Clementine mandarin

Small, seedless, sweet, juicy and easy-to-peel, Clementines are the perfect fruit for kids.

Available: November through January

Citrus varieties

Here are some of the more unusual fruits. Note: The citrus trade uses the names tangerine and mandarin interchangeably. Generally, tangerines have seeds and mandarins do not. Look for these fruits at larger supermarkets, produce markets, or online at orchard sites or sites such as fromthefarm.com.

Pummelo

Popular in Asia, the largest of all citrus and ancestor of the grapefruit is developing a following in the U.S. Pummelos have green or yellow very thick skin that needs a knife to open. It's worth the effort for its especially aromatic and delicate-flavored light pink flesh.

Available: November through mid-May

Key lime

Small, thin-skinned and less acidic than their larger counterparts, key limes also are known as Mexican limes or lemons and West Indian limes. They are aromatic and flavorful, and their juice is used in margaritas, with beer and in Key lime pie. Their juice enhances the flavor of other foods.

Available: Year-round

Moro orange

Also called a blood orange for its dramatic deep red or maroon fruit, it sometimes has a red blush on its orange skin. Moro oranges are medium-sized and have an earthy, sweet flavor. Moros get their red color from high concentrations of a pigment called anthocyanin, an antioxidant that neutralizes the effects of free radicals, believed to be responsible for cancer, aging and other health ailments.

Available: Late December through mid-April.



All of these citrus items can be researched further at www.weshipproduce.com. The Coosemans Shipping Produce Guide offers information and history about most specialty products. We supply these items and other winter citrus, including the Sweet/Persian Lime, the citron and Ojai Pixie Tangerines.