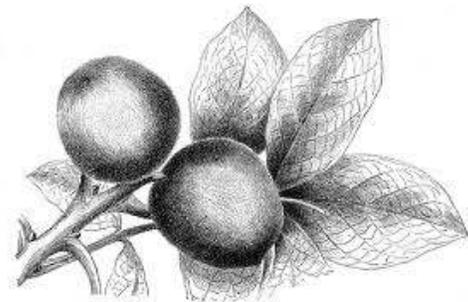


Walnut



The walnut tree has thrived since before recorded history. Archaeological remains of walnuts have been found in the Himalayas and Persia, as well as in Turkey, Italy, France, Switzerland and the USA. In ancient Persia, only royalty could eat what was referred to as the 'royal walnut'. Persia boasted walnut groves in the famed Hanging Gardens of Babylon.

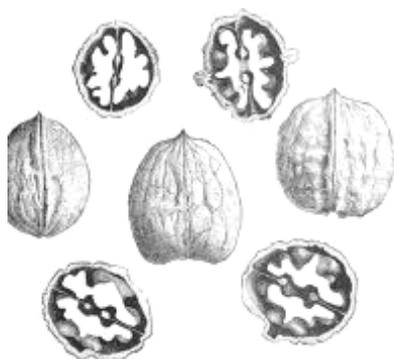
There are about a dozen species of walnut trees with edible nuts, all belonging to the same family as the pecan and other hickory nut trees. The first cultivation of walnuts has been attributed to the ancient Greeks, but it was the Persians who cultivated a superior variety. When the ancient Greeks came across the larger and better Persian walnuts, they began to improve their variety and used the nuts not only as food but also as a medicine and as a dye for hair, wool, and cloth. The walnut appears in Greek mythology in the story of Carya, with whom the god Dionysus fell in love. When Carya died, Dionysus transformed her into a walnut tree and a temple was built in her memory. Its columns, sculpted in wood in the form of young women, were called caryatides, or nymphs of the walnut tree, in her honour.

Some time later, the Romans discovered the merits of walnuts. Evidence of this was found in the ruins of Pompeii, where whole, unshelled walnuts were among the foods on the table at the Temple of Isis on that fateful day when Mount Vesuvius erupted. Walnuts probably journeyed to China via Kashmir, circa 200 BCE. Merchants, explorers, and conquerors were credited with bringing the nut from the Mediterranean into Europe. Since English merchant sailors transported walnuts across the globe during medieval times, walnuts became so associated with the English that they were often called English walnuts. The English climate made cultivation of walnuts difficult at first; only after World War I did walnuts become a commercial enterprise in England.

Unlike the English, the French embraced the walnut, cultivation in France began as early as the 4th century. Walnuts were so highly regarded that during the 11th century, French peasants were expected to tithe walnuts to the church. While the poor dined on wild walnuts, the rich were able to afford the larger cultivated variety. In the French countryside, it was a tradition to hang a bag of walnuts from the ceiling beam in the kitchen to represent abundance. Towards the end of the 17th century, walnuts became, along with chestnuts, an important staple food in France. During the famine of 1663, the poor consumed their walnuts and then resorted to grinding up the shells along with acorns to create a coarse, and no doubt unpalatable bread. In World War II, starving families living in small villages of some districts in France turned to their walnut groves for a source of protein.

In the USA, native American Indians enjoyed the native black walnut well before European explorers arrived. The first European walnuts came from Spain in the early 1800s. The French contributed many of their varieties during the latter part of the 19th century.

Nowadays commercial quantities of walnuts are grown in the USA, France, China, Russia, India, Turkey, Greece, Italy, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Switzerland, Australia and New Zealand.



The walnut fruit is a green drupe, with flesh surrounding a hard-shelled stone, inside of which is the edible kernel. When the fruit is very young, the shell is soft, the whole fruit is edible but very sour. Unripe fruits are better made into pickles or jam. Half-ripe fruits are delicious preserved in syrup. Fully ripe walnuts are eaten as desert nuts or used in cakes and confectionary. They are also used in savoury dishes, such as French walnut soup, walnut sauce (made with oil, garlic and horseradish), or walnut '*pesto*' (oil, garlic and basil or rocket).

The fruits are important in traditional Chinese herbal medicine. The trees are considered valuable timber trees. The practice of pressing oil from walnuts is of great antiquity, as is the use of walnut juice as a dye.