

THE LYCHEE CULTURE

The litchi is a fruit whose international trade has presented a significant growth in the last few years due to its excellent flavor and smell of its edible part, the aril. The Lychee (*Litchi chinensis*) is an arborous plant of subtropical climate that belongs to the Sapindaceae botanical family. It is from the South of China, more specifically from the Cantón province, and it is considerate a national fruit in this country and, in others, the 'queen of fruits'. It was introduced in Brazil in 1810, at the Jardim Botânico of Rio de Janeiro, where it perfectly adapted itself, and nowadays it is widely cultivated in the Southeast, in both domestic and commercial orchards.

It is the kind of plant that grows slowly, with a rounded, dense, compact and symmetrical crown. Its ornamental character becomes more evident in the harvest time, when racemes of brilliant and red fruits are disposed in the tree's periphery area; also it is cultivated at residential gardens in the American cities of San Diego, San Francisco and Los Angeles. The Lychee is characterized by the rusticity and the remarkable longevity; also in China there is a copy which is more than 1200 years old, which annually flourishes produces fruits.

The Lychee inflorescence is composed by various panicles produced in branches of year, with small flowers, which are not dressy, in general, white-yellowish. It is a simple fruit of rounded shape or ovoid, presenting in its interior, a seed and an edible part, botanically denominated aril, which represents 70 to 80% of the fruits mass, according to the cultivar.

The litchi pulp presents a sugar content that varies from 11 to 20.6%, calorific value of 65calories/100 g of pulp and between 40 and 90 mg of vitamin C/100g of pulp. It is used for natural consumption, for juice fabrication, compotes and as dried fruit. The fruit harvest is from November to January, since it is responsible for supplying the market during the Christmas festivities, when the demand and the price are higher. The cultivars which have more crops in the country are 'Bengal' and 'Brewster', with productivity ranging from 150kg to 180kg per plant, after the stabilization of the production.

In Brazil, this culture is not very well known, probably because of the product's high value. There are not statistics in relation to the cultivated area and the production of this culture, but it is estimated the existence of 2000 to 4000 installed hectares, in which the state of São Paulo is responsible for 60 to 70% of this area. The tendency is that this area gets developed, due to the present profits obtained by the producers and the increasing demand for these exotic fruits.

In the recent years, this fruit tree has been considerate as an alternative investment or as a diversifying income source in the property. However, some difficulties can be seen in its cultivation, and among them we can evidence the lack of culture improvement programs that aim genotypes adapted to our conditions and with high productivity; elimination of the production alternation from one year to another; development of promising propagation techniques and both harvest and post-harvest technologies.

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