

Dates: Nature's Caramel

Did you know it can take 7 to 10 years to harvest dates? Dates are a delicious, naturally sweet fruit that grows on palm trees. Harvesting dates is a long process that includes repeatedly climbing up and down date palm trees.

Dates are believed to have first been cultivated between Mesopotamia and Egypt in 4000 B.C. They flourish the most in tropical and subtropical regions and are most prominently found in Iraq, Iran, Morocco, Arabia, and North Africa. In the early 20th century, dates started being cultivated in southern California, Florida, and Arizona. To harvest dates, growers must first make sure each palm is pollinated. They must also climb the tree frequently to monitor air circulation, trim thorns, and ensure all plants get proper sunlight. Once the dates reach the growers desired size, they are covered with burlap sacks, so birds and insects do not eat them. Lastly, the dates are slowly picked as they ripen until all the harvest is taken.

Walter Swingle brought date offshoots back to the United States with him, which led to the dates we grow in the United States today. There are two main types of dates in the United States today. Medjool dates are soft on the outside and have a caramel flavor, and deglet noor dates have a firm outer layer and honey-like flavor. Most dates have an oval shape and are 1 to 2 inches long. Dates have a long narrow pit or seed in the center, but you can buy them pitted for convenience.

Eaten fresh or dried, stuffed or plain, mashed or chopped, dates are a versatile fruit. Thanks to modern chefs finding new uses to suit changing tastes, they are not going away anytime soon. Many are concerned about the consumption of added sugars, so dates have been a wonderful alternative sweetener and binder in things like energy bars, smoothies, and salad dressings. Dates can also be used to make pie crust, chocolate fudge, roasted dates stuffed with cheese, date caramel, date cookies, and many more. People also use ground date powder as an alternative for granulated sugar. When cooking or baking with dates, 1 pound equals about 2 1/2 cups, and 8 ounces equals 1 1/4 cup.

A 3.5-ounce serving of pitted deglet noors, or 14 dates, provides about 282 calories, 2.5 grams of protein, less than half a gram of fat, and 75 grams of carbohydrates. Per 3.5-ounce serving, or about 4 pitted dates, the larger, meatier semi-soft medjool variety supplies 277 calories, 1.8 grams of protein, very little fat, and 75 grams of carbohydrates.

Dates are sold fresh or dry. Fresh dates have 50 to 90 percent water content, whereas dried ones contain less than 20 percent. When buying fresh dates, look for a smooth, plump surface. Watch for shriveled skin, as it may mean there is mold on the dates. When bought fresh, dates can last in the refrigerator for up to two weeks before drying out. Fresh dates are only in season from late summer to mid-fall, but dried dates are available year-round. If stored in a cool, dry place, in an airtight container, dried dates will last six months, and if stored in the refrigerator, they will last up to one year. Dates can also be placed in the freezer for up to one year.

You may now be wondering what will I do with dates after I buy them. Well, dates are a versatile ingredient that can be added to sweet and savory dishes. Some of my favorites are sweet

and salty date crackers, bacon-wrapped dates, and stuffed dates. Dates can also be used in cakes, dessert bars, granola bars, and many other recipes!

Dates are a healthy, delicious sweet tropical fruit that everyone should try at least once. So, next time you are at the store, keep an eye out for fresh or dried dates to try adding to your next recipe.

(Sources: foodandnutrition.org, fruitsandveggies.org, www.liveeatlearn.com, fdc.nal.usda.gov)