

The Cactus of the Year 2021

Hylocereus undatus - dragon fruit

Dragonfruit - the mother of this fruit does not spit fire, but is the cactus species *Hylocereus undatus*. Described in 1830 by the English botanist Adrian Haworth, the origin of the fruit is said to be China, but this must be wrong, because cacti do not occur naturally in China. The exact origin of this species is assumed to be in southern Mexico, but today it is native and wild growing in the entire subtropics.

Hylocereus undatus forms shoots up to 5 m long with mostly three ribs, which have wavy edges. The plants are dependent on a support and thus grow leaning against trees, bushes, rocks, walls etc. The white flowers, which can reach a diameter of up to 30 cm, appear along the entire shoot and are among the largest flowers of all cactus plants. They open at dusk and close early in the morning of the next day. However, the wonderful flower splendour lasts only one night. As a result, *Hylocereus undatus* is often confused with the Queen of the Night (*Selenicereus grandiflorus*). After pollination by moths, butterflies and, to a lesser extent, birds, the barrel-shaped fruits, up to 9 cm long and 5 cm thick, are formed after 3–4 months. These are red on the outside, the pulp is watery white.

The name dragonfruit originated because the large scales on the fruit are reminiscent of the wings of dragons. Often the fruits are also found under the name Pitahaya or Pitaya at markets or in trade.

Since pre-Columbian times the fruits have been used as food. Today they are grown in large plantations in South East Asia (mainly Vietnam and Thailand), Israel, China and Nicaragua and exported all over the world. Besides the species *Hylocereus undatus* (white flesh with pink fruit), one increasingly finds *Hylocereus monacanthus* with red pulp and pink fruit as well as *Hylocereus megalanthus* with white pulp and yellow fruit under the name dragon fruit.

For some time now, the dragon fruit has also been known as superfood - following the spirit of the times. For example, it is said to help lower cholesterol and blood sugar levels, and even eliminate certain cancer cells. Whether all these effects are actually present, however, has not yet been conclusively clarified. It has been proven that the dragon fruit contains numerous vitamins and minerals, so it is certainly healthy to enjoy. The dragon fruit is eaten raw, either peeled or eaten like a kiwi with a spoon.

Furthermore, the shoots of *Hylocereus undatus* are often used as grafting rootstocks for other cactus species such as the strawberry cactus (*Gymnocalycium friedrichii*). The dragon fruit is such a good example of the fact that cacti also have a benefit for humans that goes beyond their purely visual appeal as ornamental plants.

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