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# ECCENTRIC CITRUS

BY DANA COOK



“Are those lemons?” people would ask as they walked by our stand in the Ojai Farmers’ Market every Sunday. “No, they’re called Buddha’s Hands, one of the oldest of citrus fruit varieties,” I would chant.

This was probably my 22nd time saying that. Hardly anyone had heard of a Buddha’s Hand citron, and I wouldn’t have either, if I hadn’t worked at Jim Churchill and Lisa Brenneis’ stand. They sell avocados and “eccentric citrus,” which is where the Buddha’s Hand comes in. Shoppers would come by our stand just to look at the Buddha’s Hands.

Customers were also drawn to the stand by the Buddha’s Hand’s overwhelming aroma. I would occasionally give the fruit a quick dust with a brush, just to show off their smell and make them look as pretty as possible. As soon as they were brushed, the citrons almost glowed. Bright yellow, full of rind, with many fingers interlacing, they were quite a conversation starter. Their “fingers” stuck out in odd places, making them look gnarly and arthritic. One older man even described them as “fugly.”

When the frost hit Ojai last winter, Jim and Lisa were down at their orchard, trying to save all of their crops. My mom, dad and I were all there helping, along with Jim and Lisa’s workers and other friends (even a Superior Court judge!). The tall people, who were mostly the men, lifted the sheets over the little rows of tangerines and other trees. The baby kishu tangerine trees were the most precious, and they got the most care.

I felt like I would freeze to death. My toes weren’t attached to my body anymore. They had somehow fallen off

along the way as I ran through the orchard, being messenger to Lisa, Jim and my mom.

It was all worth it, though, since most of the citrus was salvaged, but a lot of the avocados didn’t make it. I was really upset when I heard that the Buddha’s Hand trees didn’t make it. They were especially hard hit by the frost. All the fruit froze, mostly because they don’t contain much sugar, which acts like antifreeze. I recently heard from Lisa, though, that the Buddha’s Hands came back. There are two Buddha’s Hands on one tree, while small, green ones blend in with the leaves.

Even though they are hard to grow and pick, especially since there are huge thorns on the trees, the Buddha’s Hands have paid for themselves. One Buddha’s Hand, with about a dozen slender fingers,

went for \$20, and that’s a lot for one fruit. A woman once stopped by on her way out of the market and bought 11—for medicinal purposes, she said. Another customer said that she had made a type of “digestive tea” out of the rinds. I even had to help her carry all her groceries and Buddha’s Hands to her car, since she had bought so many.

Before the frost, people would ask, “What are they for?” My mom and I would answer simply (mostly because we’d practiced it a hundred times), “You can candy them for desserts, dry them for Chinese medicine, use them fresh or shaved in salads, and they also make great conversation pieces.”

I’ll admit, it was a little tiresome to say the same rant, but it was worth it when people were so interested and amazed, they bought one just for the heck of it. Lisa said, after I called and asked why she liked to sell them so much, “I like to sell them because of people’s reactions to the fruits. Most of the shoppers liked them.” It wasn’t like they were actually going to put it in their salads or teas, but probably more to just say, “I once bought one of those!” Well, that’s at least what my family does.

*Dana Toshi Cook loves the outdoors and knows how lucky she is to live in a place like Ojai. She also loves to be at the beach, surfing or swimming. Dana is a certified diver, someday hopes to be a marine biologist, and is very happy working for Jim and Lisa at the farmers’ markets and packing the fruit. Dana attends Matilija Middle School.*

Photograph by Carole Topalian