

Japanese Quince

I think I might have been a strange little child. When most kids were watching the Flintstones, I was digging plants out of the woods and rooting around abandoned farm houses for interesting plants. I first spotted the Japanese quince on one of my many unsupervised plant field trips. It was growing on the side of a falling down farmhouse and was in full bloom when I first spied it. Later that year, I went back and noticed the bush was loaded with a bumper crop of golf ball sized, harder than hell, and very fragrant fruit. I did the only sensible thing, I picked all the fruit and headed home with them. I had an older gardener friend and I asked her if anything could be done with the fruit. She told me you could make jelly out of the fruits, which of course I did. I think I was about 7, which does suggest I was an odd child.

So, I began experimenting with making stuff with Japanese quince fruits 39 years ago and I am still at it. Some toys never get old. As I sit down to write this, I have a big bowl of Japanese quinces on my table, waiting to be canned. The entire room is fragranced with a powerful and beguiling scent that is a mix of apple and really strong pineapple.....these little golf balls of flavor crank out scent like a plug in air freshener. That is one of the really unique attributes of this fruit, it has an incredible perfume. Everything has something that sets it apart, and in this case, quince has scent and flavor going on. They smell great and you can make a lot of really wonderful things with them. I suggest everyone plant one in their garden because they are really easy to grow and their fruit is very useful.

In America, the Japanese quince is seen as an ornamental bush. It produces drop dead beautiful flowers in early spring and does so, year after year, with no help from the gardener. Here is a good example of its maintenance free nature. Near my farm there is an old Japanese quince bush growing on the side of a major highway, bathed in car fumes, mulched with Big Mac boxes, cigarette butts, empty beer bottles, and the occasional shoe or panty. Under those less than ideal conditions, it's been blooming for the last 30 years. I know because I have been driving by it for three decades, and every year it brightens the highway with its pretty pink blooms. It even survived an overpass installation. The Japanese quince is a keeper those seeking that allusive maintenance free garden! The plants bloom in the red, pink, white, orange, and all the colors in between. The best part is they provide a bit of color just when you need something to shake off those end of winter "I hate the world" blues.

The truth be told, I hate orange flowers. When I see an orange flower, it makes me want to spray Round Up. It's a spontaneous reaction that comes from deep within. I would like to start a campaign to eradicate all orange flowers, perhaps an action committee. Hate orange flowers. Sadly, many of the commonly available Japanese quinces produce a disgusting orange flower. And, if you have only ever seen the vile nasty orange variety, you may think you hate Japanese quinces. But, forget about that hateful orange variety. Dig deeper and you will discover this soldier of a plant has varieties in the most beautiful shades of red and pink. My personal favorite is Toyo Nishihi which produces the most magnificent white and pink flowers all on the same branch. If you are looking for an excellent, "NOT ORANGE" Japanese quince variety, I would suggest you visit www.raintreenursery.com. Raintree Nursery has a fab collection Japanese quinces and you are bound to find one that strikes your fancy.

Anyhow, following the lovely flowers comes a load edible, but rarely eaten, quinces. Some varieties produce a quince the size of a golf ball, others, a fruit the size of an apple. One of the reasons I adore the variety Toyo Nishiki is because it produces a mammoth apple sized fruit, and in great numbers. The quince bush produces its fruit without the aid of fertilizer, insecticide, or thinning. Just leave that bad boy alone and come early fall you will be rewarded with a basket full of fruit. Some of the fruits are small, some are big, but all are incredibly fragrant and delicious. Even the ugly orange flowering varieties produce useful fruit! (Which is hard for me to say, considering how I feel about orange flowers.) But, its true.

Let's talk about this fruit. As I sit, enveloped in the luscious scent pumped out by my bowel of quinces, I am once again shocked by the fact most Americans don't know the fruit is edible, let alone really, really worth eating. This is largely due to the fact the plant was introduced to Americans as an ornamental flower producer and not as a source of food.

It is also due to another practical reality. The fruit is hard as a rock. You could not bite into a Japanese quince if you had a pit bulls jaw and teeth. So, even if the smell lured you into giving it a bite, most would quickly be put off by the breaking of the front teeth. And, that's the thing about the Japanese quince. It's not edible until you cook it. I know that is a dirty word in many American homes, but, sometimes taking the time to cook is worth it. If you want to know the deliciousness of the Japanese quince, you will have to cook it.

The plant is called Japanese quince so we might travel to Japan to learn a little more about it. The Japanese call this fruit Karin. They grow three types of Japanese quince, and that list would include *Chaenomeles japonica*, *Chaenomeles speciosum*, and *Chaenomeles sinica*. The first two are indigenous to Japan, the third is indigenous to China and was introduced to Japan in ancient times. The Japanese quince is commercially cultivated mostly in the northeast and middle districts of Japan and the resulting fruit is used to produce popular medicine, food, and booze.

Japanese Quince as Medicine

In Japan, this quince finds its way into several forms of medicine for several maladies. In some cases, the ripe fruits are harvested in autumn, dried in the sun, and used in teas. Sometimes, the fruit is cooked in honey, and a richly medicinal and delicious syrup results. Lastly, the fruits are soaked in strong alcohol to create an medicinal liquor.

Our rock hard fruit has three primary medicinal uses. The first is as a anti-inflammatory in joint and muscle problems; the second is to treat and cure seasonal respiratory illness; the third is as a general tonic to stimulate health or recovery from illness. The famous Japanese illustrated encyclopedia 'Wakansansai' published three hundred years ago mentions using Japanese quince to treat coughs and phlegm. The recipe suggests the juice of Japanese quince and the root of ginger be made into a paste and sweetened with sugar. This ancient cough remedy is still

made and used in Japan today. Pleasantly, contemporary research has confirmed many of these traditional uses. Organic acids (malic acid, citric acid), Saponins (2%), Tannins, Flavones, Volatile oils, and Triterpenes, contained in the fruit, are largely responsible for the fruits action on the body. Here is a sampling of traditional uses of the Japanese quince.

Cough and cold Cure

Triterpenes and sterols found in Japanese quince inhibit *Streptococcus pyogenes*, the bug that causes strep throat and the more dangerous follow on, rheumatic fever. In addition, it has a proven anti-inflammatory effect which reduces the swelling and tenderness associated with a sore throat, and the swollen shut airways associated with a common cold and influenza. The fruit was also found to inhibit bacteria caused sore throats on another level. Quince tannins inhibited hyaluronidase, an enzyme produced by bacteria that causes painful swelling in the throat and nasal passages.

Immune stimulant

In an experiment with mice, Japanese quince was found to stimulate immune function, even when the mice were given immune system destroying chemotherapy drugs.

Joint Pain

Joint and muscle pain, anyone? Well, Japanese quince has been shown to reduce inflammation and this explains why it's a traditional Japanese cure for joint pain and arthritis. One study showed that a tea of Japanese quince decreased swelling in artificially induced arthritis in mice! Ok, it might be mice proof, but, it backs up a long held traditional use of the fruit.

Another study found that Japanese quince had a potent anti-inflammatory effect and it occurred on cellular level. The research found that quince polyphenols(tannins) inhibited histamine release from mast cells...the cells at the root of much joint inflammation.

A third study with laboratory animals revealed that syrup made with 10% alcohol was the most effective at reducing joint pain. The researchers concluded Japanese quince s use in rheumatoid arthritis, prosopalgia, and hepatitis, all three inflammatory conditions, was justified.

In Rheumatoid Arthritis, long term joint inflammation causes joint damage. Two additional groups of researchers found that Japanese quince could be used to reduce this long term inflammation and in turn, reduce the joint damage that occurs over time.

Inflammation

If inflammation is a problem, Japanese quince may be the solution. There are two types of inflammation, temporary and chronic. Temporary inflammation would be like that associated with a cough or cold, a sun burn, or over exertion caused sore muscles. Examples of chronic inflammation would be things like rheumatoid arthritis, hepatitis, and eczema. In both types of inflammation, tradition and research supports the use of Japanese quince.

Diarrhea Cure

In traditional Chinese medicine, Japanese quince is used to treat bacteria caused diarrhea. Researchers found that the modest little fruit was active against E. Coli caused diarrhea, and three compounds found in the fruit were at least partly responsible. (Oleanolic acid, ursolic acid, and betulinic acid.)

New Parkinson Medication?

Japanese quince is traditionally used a wide variety of nervous disorders, including migraine, depression, and chronic pain. Researchers found that it had an effect, on a cellular level, on the big mother of nervous disorders, Parkinson's Disease. Who knows, there may be a new and useful Parkinson medication locked in the Japanese quince.

Health Booster

In traditional Chinese and Japanese medicine, it is considered a tonic, a medicine which stimulates strength, vigor in health. Most importantly, it is thought to increase the bodies' own capacity to heal itself. This traditional use in China and Japan is something the scientific community is beginning to prove. The conventional wisdom on this one is that if you are feeling run down, or are recovering from an illness, a boost from the quince may be exactly what you need.

As a medicine, quince syrup is probably the best way to go. Use the syrup that results from canning the quinces for a sore throat, a sore joint, or any other form of inflammation. Especially if it is as a result of a cough or a cold. Lastly, the Japanese say it is good to stimulate general health, so, if you are feeling run down, you may want to add Japanese quince syrup to your health regimen. The recommended amount, for medicinal uses, is a tablespoon of the syrup, three or four times a day.

Japanese Quince As A Food

Now that we know we should be eating those odd little fruits the question becomes how? As I said earlier, this is not a fruit you pick and eat. It has to be cooked. The good news is that the process could not be easier.

Here is what I do. I pick the fruit in the fall, when it begins to turn yellow and put off its characteristic fragrance. Just get down on the ground and smell your quinces. When they smell, it's time to pick them.

Once picked, I wash the fruit. Next, I fill canning jars with the fruit. I then fill the jars with honey. (If you prefer, any heavy sugar syrup of your liking will work.) Then, I put canning lids on the jars, and put the jars in a pot with a tight fitting lid. Then, I add water to the pot so the jars are half covered with water, pop on the lid and turn the heat to high. Once the water starts boiling, reduce the heat to medium, and let the water boil for half an hour. Keep the lid on the pot. Once the half hour is up, turn off the heat. When the pot cools completely (usually four or five hours later), I remove the jars and wipe them off. Presto magic...canned quinces in heavy syrup.

If you want to do something simpler, try this. Put the quinces in a pot large enough to hold your load of quinces and cover with honey. Bring the honey quince combo to a slow boil, and cook covered for half an hour. Stir occasionally so the quinces don't stick to the bottom of the pot and burn. After half an hour of cooking, turn the heat off. Once the pot has cooled, put the quinces and the syrup in an airtight jar and store in the refrigerator. They will hold in the fridge for about two weeks. You can freeze the remaining syrup to keep on hand for its many applications.

Canned quinces will last for years, and, to have an interesting desert, just pop the lid of the jar! You can serve the quinces in a bowl with a touch of cream, or dump them and some syrup on top of a nice scoop of ice cream.

Whether you can the quinces, or make a fresh pot of stewed quinces, you will have a load of delectable syrup. This syrup can be added to seltzer water or just regular tap water to create a sweet and healthy beverage. You can also add it to hot tea for a warming beverage. It can be used on pancakes instead of the usual maple syrup, and, can be used in recipes that call for corn syrup.

If you are really detail oriented, and what more complete canning instructions, you can use any recipe for canning pears in heavy syrup. In this case, just substitute the pears for your crop of Japanese quinces.

Japanese Quince as a Booze

The Japanese love to mix quinces, sugar, and alcohol to make a liquor that is well loved. It is a combination that goes over big in its homeland so it is probably worth a try! And, it could not be easier to make. Take your quinces and cut them in quarters. Fill a quart mason jar to the top with the quartered quinces. Add half a cup of honey or sugar to the quinces, fill the jar with vodka of any variety, and screw on the lid. Let the vodka infuse for three or four months, and, you will end up with a tasty, fruity vodka that is really good for you. Perhaps try making Quince-tini's. For a more official process, check out this website. <http://kyotofoodie.com/karinshu-japanese-quince-liqueur/>

Wrapping it all Up

So, who knew that the fruit hanging off your flowering quince vine had so many possible uses? Probably not many. If you have a flowering quince, start using the fruit. If you don't have one, this is a really great addition to the garden. And, even if you don't have a Japanese quince bush, chances are one of your neighbors does, and, would not mind donating the fruit they produce! Just don't tell them how useful they are.

Sadly, apart from growing your own, you have limited opportunities to sample this tasty pleasure. They are not grown commercially in this country and cannot be had fresh at the market. But, if you are lucky enough to have an Asian market near you, with a Japanese food section, you might find karin syrup. You will have to ask for it as the packaging may be in Japanese!

