

Save the date - Black Sphinx Dates

From John Wake's Arizona Real Estate Notebook

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In a previous life, I had a mail order business along the lines of a mini Harry and David. My signature product was Black Sphinx dates, although I called them "Celebration" dates, a name I trademarked for marketing reasons.

The dates got rave reviews from food editors all across the country - Dallas, Denver, Atlanta, Philadelphia, Phoenix and others.

[Unfortunately, the business was a financial disaster for me so for mental health reasons I expunged anything to do with it from my computers years ago and don't have any glittering newspaper quotes handy to show you.]

Black Sphinx dates are spectacular.

Black Sphinx dates are one of life's great little pleasures.

Would you like a fresh date?

Americans know dates as a dried fruit. Black Sphinx dates are a fresh fruit.

It's like the difference between a grape and a raisin, or between a plum and a prune. The fresh fruit is a totally different fruit.

For example, Black Sphinx dates have an amazing creamy, melt in your mouth texture. They are a true gourmet experience that shouldn't be missed.

Why Black Sphinx dates are so rare?

One problem with Black Sphinx dates is they are a fresh date. **They require extremely delicate handling and they need to be kept refrigerated** or frozen. Unrefrigerated, their quality will remain excellent for only a week or so.

In addition, Black Sphinx dates **do not dry well**. They have very thin skin which tends to crack when dried exposing the fruit.

Another problem is the demand for dates is extremely seasonal. In the United States, **dates are mainly a Christmas food**. It is tough to sell dates after Christmas or before Thanksgiving.

Also Black Sphinx dates are extremely rich. **Only one pound is enough** for most date lovers to get through the holidays. It's not a reoccurring purchase.

Black Sphinx dates are **smaller than Medjool dates**. Americans prefer big dates like Medjools.

Further, **dates are out of style**. Baby boomers, for example, don't eat dates.

Loved by the WW II generation

The World War II generation, however, loves dates but they are now fewer and fewer in number.

Many in the World War II generation have extremely fond memories of Christmas dates from their childhood.

Back before candy was everywhere, and especially during World War II when sugar was severely rationed, **dates were their candy**. A healthy candy but a candy nevertheless.

I've heard many fond stories of waking up on Christmas morning to find dates and tangerines in their Christmas stocking... and they were thrilled! Baby boomers will absolutely not believe this but these storytellers were actually thrilled to find dates in their Christmas stockings.

By the way, if you are Jewish, Italian, Greek or otherwise of Mediterranean heritage, it has been my experience that you are far more likely to love dates than the average American.

Where did Black Sphinx dates originate?

They originated in Phoenix that we know for sure... but not much more.

One likely legend is that they originated from a rogue date that had fallen from a tree and taken root. Date seeds have a mother and a father so each date seed is genetically unique.

A date that falls from a tree and takes root will be very different from the mother and it will be very different from the father.

To reproduce date palms that are identical to the mother, you cut an offshoot from the mother and plant it in the ground. It's quite a trick to cut out an offshoot from the mother date palm without damaging the mother.

The rogue date

Okay, now back to the story. It's likely that a rogue date palm grew up in an unattended area around someone's home in Phoenix during the 1920's. It was common back then to have a few date palms around your house.

In this particular case, the area had to be unattended for quite a while because it would take a few years before the rogue palm would be old enough to produce fruit. Eventually, someone discovered the amazing fruit, took offshoots and planted them and Black Sphinx dates slowly became a local delicacy.

One legend has it that Mr. Brophy of Brophy Prep fame, a large farmer, promoted the serendipitous date variety.

One local date aficionado, Scott Frische, says he occasionally finds single Black Sphinx date palms, as well as other rare varieties, growing next to old homes in the older parts of Phoenix. It reflects a time in Phoenix when people would plant dates as well as citrus around their homestead.

For the Arabs and date connoisseurs out there, it's likely that at least one parent was a Hayani variety date palm.

The Date Grove in Arcadia

There was only one commercial grove that I know of. It was probably planted in the 1940's and was developed into a housing subdivision in the late 1950's.

It's the "Date Grove" neighborhood in the Arcadia area of Phoenix. The grove with houses underneath, is located just south of Lafayette Blvd on either side of 47th St.

[Real estate digression: There was a packing shed and retail store on Lafayette Blvd. It was zoned commercial. After the date operation was closed, the owners wanted to put in a market. To avoid having a commercial facility in the middle of residential Arcadia, Phoenix eventually allowed condos to be built on the site, still today the only condos in Arcadia proper.]

Harry to the rescue

The Arcadia date grove was not worked for several years. Then in the 1970's, Harry Polk, one of the first managers of the Gentle Strength Coop in Tempe started to work the trees and sell the dates.

As the decades went on, the trees got taller, greatly complicating working the date palms and increasing the cost of producing the fresh dates.

In addition, Phoenix got hotter because of the heat island effect. The Black Sphinx dates that once ripened slowly in the Fall started to ripen earlier - and very quickly - in September and August. The shortened harvest season complicated the harvest, increased the quantity of dates lost to over ripening, and generally raised the cost of production.

In 1992 Liz and I bought a home in the Date Grove and became familiar with the whole story. For working our trees, Harry gave us Black Sphinx dates and they were a sensation with my friends and relatives. I was a date sharecropper! We moved to McCormick Ranch in Scottsdale in 1997 but we still love the dates.

Will Black Sphinx dates be lost?

Today, Harry is in his mid-50's. **This week Harry told me that 2007 was the last year he would work the date trees.**

It was always amazing to see Harry up in the trees working the date palms. It seemed very dangerous. Each tree has to be climbed several times each year from pollinating the flowers to harvesting the fresh fruit.

When I called Harry, he had already sold his last supply of fresh dates.

Fortunately, a former neighbor living in the Date Grove bought 1,000 pounds of dates from Harry. She was selling them locally to test out the market and whether she should work a few trees herself next year.

I sure hope she does.

One of life's great, little pleasures

Black Sphinx dates make a fantastic snack if you have a sweet tooth. [Don't tell anyone that dates are healthy. It will just ruin it for them.]

I find that Black Sphinx dates satisfy my sweet tooth much better than chocolate or ice cream. Black Sphinx dates are so rich that after eating a couple my sweet tooth is satisfied and I don't crave more sweets.

[Dates are an excellent source of fiber which may partially explain why they make you feel so satisfied. They are a real food. They aren't just sugar and flavor.]

And anyway, if you have several, who cares? They're healthy.

Indulge yourself!

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This may be your last chance to experience this amazing Arizona grown delight. You may not have another chance... ever.

Call Erica at her home for information on how to buy a 1-pound basket for \$6. I suggest you buy a flat of 12, 1-pound baskets for \$60 and use them as gifts when dropping by your neighbors or going to holiday parties. By the way, the packaging is NOT suitable for sending by mail.

If you live in Arcadia, Erica will actually take them to your home! [Obviously, Erica is doing this because she loves of this rare, heirloom variety of dates and wants to share them with you.]

The best way you can preserve Black Sphinx dates is to call Erica and buy some from her.

You can call Erica, the Black Sphinx date lady, at her home at **602-840-0622**.