

Learn about loquats at first ever Florida Loquat Festival

The inaugural event will offer seedlings, trees and presentations on making jellies and jams.



Market Off Main owners Rose Mohr, right, and Jerry Fuss prepare a loquat pie while testing recipes for Saturday's event. BRENDAN FITTERER | Times



By Arleen Spenceley, Times Staff Writer

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NEW PORT RICHEY — In preparation for Saturday's inaugural Florida Loquat Festival, the venue is reserved, the preserves are canned and founder Dell deChant is aware of a common question:

What the heck is a loquat?

"We call it the urban fruit," said deChant, a master instructor of religious studies at the University of South Florida, whose penchant for loquats is an avocation. The loquat doesn't require a grove or a farm to grow.

Even if you haven't heard of loquats, you probably have seen them, deChant said, growing in yellow or orange clusters on trees that line yards

and roads and golf courses.

Loquat trees are everywhere in the Tampa Bay area, he said, and they bear fruit in abundance. But the loquat is "so unknown" that most people who see it pass it up, unaware they're overlooking something juicy and delicious.

Sometimes, a loquat tastes like an apple; other times, like a plum. It is related to apples, pears, peaches and nectarines, according to the University of Florida IFAS Extension. Its downy peel and juicy pulp are edible. The disproportionately big, brown seeds inside it are not.

"We are in the harvest season right now," DeChant said. But "90 percent of (loquats) are going to go to waste."

Why?

"For better or worse, we're all consumers," deChant said, and how aware we are of something depends on how consumable it is. The loquat, he said, hasn't been touted as consumable the way other Florida produce has been.

"Look at the kumquat," deChant said. "It's 'arrived.' The folks in Dade City have done a tremendous job of marketing kumquats" — which, for the record, are not related to loquats.

Loquats deserve the limelight, too, deChant said.

So what if their seeds are huge?

"Once folks have actually tried (loquats), they can get over the size of the pit," deChant said.

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Sue Andreski, owner of Black Cat Growers — a garden at her home in Holiday — who has collected loquats for jams, preserves and pies she is making for the festival, said "it's a pretty tree, it's evergreen and it's under-utilized."

Loquat trees "can take a freeze, they can take the heat," said deChant. The fruit is "not a replacement for citrus, but might be thought of as a companion to citrus. The loquat may fill the gap between now and when the citrus industry comes back strong."

DeChant hopes the Florida Loquat Festival puts loquats in that position — or, at least, into your hands.

If you go, don't expect an event comparable to the Kumquat Festival or Strawberry Festival. There won't be clowns or a midway.

The Florida Loquat Festival is educational, deChant said, not recreational, though there will be live music. Expect free loquat seeds — "We'll have hundreds," deChant said, plus loquats and seedlings and trees of all sizes for moderate prices. Loquat pros will give presentations on the history of the loquat, which originated in China; on how to make loquat jellies and jams, which Andreski will sample and sell at the fest; and on the importance of urban agriculture.

When deChant looked for one, he said, "I couldn't find a loquat festival anywhere this side of China. It's time for the loquat to come out of the closet."

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