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Gac: Strange Name, Powerful Fruit

By Chris Kilham

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Yes, it has a strange name. No, you most likely haven't heard of it before. And yes, it is definitely a fruit you need to know. It's Gac fruit (*Momordica cochinchinensis*), a strange and beautiful red fruit originating from Vietnam, where it is harvested in December and January. The fruit is cultivated throughout Southeast Asia and China, often as an ornamental plant due to its magnificent color. Also known as Chinese bitter cucumber, cundeamor and bhat karella, Gac fruit is rich in the antioxidants beta-carotene, lycopene (seventy times more than in tomatoes), and zeaxanthin. It contains the highest concentration of beta carotene of any known fruit or vegetable (ten times as much as carrots). Beta carotene is a reddish antioxidant that shows up in a host of fruits and vegetables, from apricots to pumpkins. It converts to vitamin A in the body, and has a variety of protective properties.

Gac fruit is traditionally cooked into glutinous rice to produce a brilliant orange rice dish known as xoi gac. The fruit and various preparations made from it are served as special dishes at New Year celebrations, and at weddings. As a traditional medicine, Gac fruit has been employed to treat conditions of the eyes, burns, skin problems and wounds. The juice of the fruit is consumed as a healthy beverage that is good for the eyes, immunity, reproduction, skin, heart health, and the prostate. Today Gac fruit extracts are making their way into supplement products in the US and abroad.

The zeaxanthin in Gac fruit protects the tissues of the eyes against exposure to ultraviolet rays, and helps to reduce oxidation of eye tissue, thereby enhancing overall eye health. Additionally, the beta-carotene in Gac fruit helps to maintain good night vision, and reduces the risk of blindness.

For immune system enhancement, beta-carotene from Gac fruit converts in the body to vitamin A, and helps in the healthy development of white blood cells, including lymphocytes, which are important "foot soldiers" in the immune system, enabling the body to defend itself against disease.

Gac fruit's beta-carotene supports healthy reproductive function by enhancing sperm production. Converted into vitamin A, this important nutrient also plays a key role in healthy embryonic development.

The lycopene and beta-carotene in Gac fruit enhance skin health by mitigating oxidative damage in tissue. Think of oxidation as the "rusting" of our cells. These ingredients in Gac reduce that rusting process, and contribute to better-looking and healthier skin.

The various antioxidants in Gac fruit enhance heart health by specifically combating atherosclerosis, or hardening of the arteries. Additionally, both lycopene and beta-carotene show protective activity against the risk of heart attack.

Additionally, lycopene, which is super-abundant in Gac fruit, helps to reduce BPH, also known as benign prostatic hyperplasia, a five dollar term for enlargement of the prostate. There is also good evidence that lycopene can help to reduce the risk of prostate cancer.

Gac fruit grows on vines. As Gac fruit matures, it goes from a bright neon green to a lush, deep red. The fruit appears spikey and dangerous, and indeed the outer layer of the fruit (the pericarp) is toxic. But this is not the part that is eaten. Only the squiggly insides of Gac fruit (called the arils), which look strangely like red intestines, are consumed.

One Japanese study reported in the International Journal of Oncology suggested that Gac fruit may be a cancer-fighter. In this lab study, a water extract of the fruit inhibited the growth of certain tumor cells. This does not mean that Gac fruit is a cancer cure, but it almost surely will help to reduce the risk of some types of cancer. No doubt more science on the anti-cancer properties of Gac fruit will be conducted over time.

Because of its unusually high concentration of beta-carotene, Gac fruit is a valuable aid in preventing or treating vitamin A deficiency. One study of children conducted in Vietnam measured blood plasma levels of vitamin A before and after the consumption of a Gac fruit extract. The study showed that vitamin A levels increased with supplementation. In many developing countries, vitamin A deficiency is epidemic. Such deficiency can cause poor night vision, blindness, reduced ability to fight infections, higher rates of maternal mortality, poor embryonic growth, and reduced lactation. Supplementation with Gac fruit extract can alleviate chronic vitamin A deficiency, and help to reduce these health problems.

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You are not likely to encounter a stack of cantaloupe-sized Gac fruits in your local supermarket any time soon. Likewise, you will not readily find Gac juice in the cold case at your corner store. But you will see this ingredient show up in more supplements, as health experts embrace the nutritious and healing virtues of this exotic fruit.

Chris Kilham is a medicine hunter who researches natural remedies all over the world, from the Amazon to Siberia. He teaches ethnobotany at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where he is Explorer In Residence. Chris advises herbal, cosmetic and pharmaceutical companies and is a regular guest on radio and TV programs worldwide. His field research is largely sponsored by Naturex of Avignon, France. Read more at www.MedicineHunter.com

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