

Betel Nut Profile

Also known as

Areca catechu, Areca nut, Thamboolam, Paan, Pinang, Buai, Pugua, Mama'on

Introduction

The use of the betel nut goes back at least four thousand years in Indonesia, and there are references to it in the literature of Chinese, Greek, and Sanskrit texts. Currently, the chewing of the betel nut is enjoyed by, according to several sources, at least 10% of the world's population. It grows from Eastern Africa to Indonesia and out into the Pacific Islands, and is sold on the streets of many Indonesian and Asian cities from small booths. Although the nut can be chewed by itself as a stimulant, it is almost always prepared in a form that looks quite similar to a Greek dolma. The nut is sliced thin, and then wrapped with a lime paste in the leaf of the Betel tree. There is actually a bit of confusion surrounding this entire process. To begin with, the betel leaf is an entirely different plant than the betel, or areca nut. The betel leaf, whose Latin name is *piper betle*, is of the *piperaceae* family, which is closely related to black peppers and kava kava, while the betel nut is actually more closely related to the family that consists of palm trees. The nut is actually an areca nut, but is almost always called a betel nut, no doubt due to the way it has historically been prepared in conjuncture with the betel leaf. This preparation goes back thousands of years, in fact far back enough that no one has ever been able to definitively relate a tale of how or why these were paired together in the first place. When the nut is chewed by itself, it stains the teeth a reddish-orange. An extract from the nut is still used as a red and black dye in parts of Southeast Asia.

Parts Used

The inner fruit of the nut.

Typical Preparations

The nut is sliced thin and wrapped in a betel leaf and lime is added (and depending upon region, sometimes clove and cardamom are also added). The powdered form is used in various Chinese tooth powder formulas. The nut can be chewed by itself, in a way similar to chewing tobacco, but it should not be directly swallowed as it may upset the stomach quite a bit. Quite a bit of saliva is produced when chewing the nut by itself.

Summary

When marriages are discussed in Southeast Asia, they are usually talked about when chewing the betel nut, which has become so synonymous with marriage that the common phrase "matters of betel and areca" has come to mean the planning process prior to marriage. According to FDA, the betel nut contains a "poisonous or deleterious substance (arecoline)" and that habitual chewing may be linked to oral carcinoma. Despite this dire warning, there are no definitive studies published to support the allegations. In direct contradiction to the FDA, Dr. B.G. Burton-Bradley wrote in an article published in *The Lancet* that "no less than 200 million people chew the betel nut on a daily basis, the vast majority of whom do not have oral carcinoma". As with any new herb that you may want to introduce into your life, we encourage you to do your own research and consult a qualified herbal practitioner before use.

Precautions

According to all sources, betel nuts do have an addictive quality similar to that of coffee, whose effects they so richly mimic. It is not clear, however, that there is an identifiable form of physical withdrawal associated with cessation of use.