

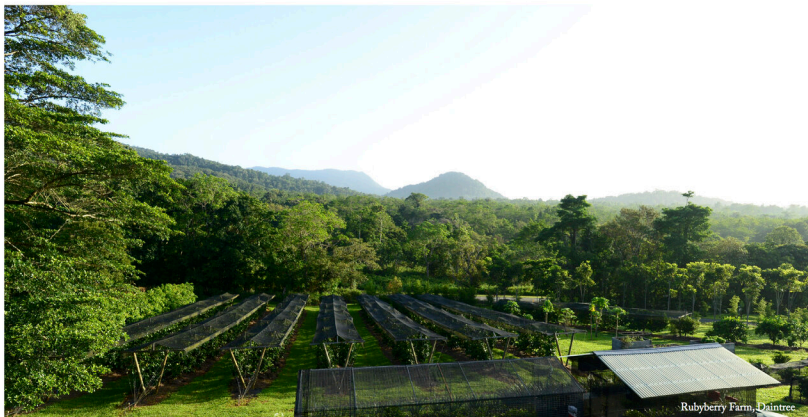


THE MIRACLE FRUIT

WORDS by Sharon Timms

"The greatest service which can be rendered to any country is to add a useful plant to its culture."

- Thomas Jefferson 1800



Rubyberry Farm, Daintree

One of the many joys of living in Tropical North Queensland is reveling in the abundance of weird and wonderful produce here, with many fruit and vegetable varieties like nothing else found throughout the rest of the country. One such example is the aptly named Miracle Fruit – a small, red, cranberry-sized fruit whose ability is to trick the brain into believing sour foods are actually sweet. Researchers have identified the ‘miracle’ being the glycoprotein miraculin, which binds to the sweet receptors of taste buds on the tongue. When acidic, sour or bitter foods are eaten, the result is amazingly sweet.

Former Sydney media and advertising executive Chris Beckwith and his partner Karen Pereira moved to the Daintree in 2013 with the idea of retiring amongst the mangosteens when they discovered the miracle fruit ‘trick’. “A friend of ours gifted us a tree, after giving us a taste of the fruit and showing what it did,” says Chris. “We showed our friends and family what these little berries could do, when someone told us of its ability to alleviate taste sensory issues.

“A good friend of ours at the time was going through quite intense chemotherapy and radiation treatment for cancer, one of the side effects being taste dysgeusia which is the distortion of taste resulting in a constant metallic taste in the mouth,” he says.

“He was eating ice straight from the freezer to get rid of the taste and had stopped eating out. There was no pleasure left in eating. So, we sent down 150 berries for him to try and see if it would have any effect. His wife filmed him as he sucked a lime. He was completely astounded that not only was the metallic taste gone, but he could actually taste the fruit. From then on, he was able to go out to restaurants and eat dinner with his family again, where normally he’d prefer to attempt eating alone.”

From the one gifted tree, the couple now operate under the company name Rubyberry, and have 2000 trees on their Daintree property with another 3000 needed for the farm to be commercial. The fruit’s discovery as a flavour enhancer, although used traditionally for centuries, has naturally piqued the attention of scientists. Rubyberries are now in the process of working with universities and a number of hospitals on small studies to test the efficacy of the fruit’s active glycoprotein on dysgeusia in cancer patients.

In the United States, preliminary studies using small patient samples have already been conducted by the Mount Sinai Medical Centre with very positive results. A freeze-dried version is currently available at all 11 hospitals of the Miami Cancer Institute. With research like this behind the fruit, Chris and Karen are positive that studies in Australia will also be conclusive,

despite it being an arduous task. “Having worked in healthcare advertising, I completely understand the pressures healthcare professionals are put under to read about something new,” says Karen. “Ideally, we’d love to get everyone in healthcare to try the fruit – to really experience what it can do.”

One of the other challenges the fruit faces is that, once picked, the miraculin only remains active for around 48 hours unrefrigerated, and up to four weeks if frozen. With only two short windows during summer each year for harvesting, it’s imperative to have tree quantity to make any dent in the supply chain. “There’s only five miracle fruit farms in the world, and none of them are in Australia. We are the first,” says Karen.

In order to meet market demand, Rubyberry is importing the freeze-dried melting tablets from the United States, with the hope of freeze-drying their own fruit once they have a plentiful supply. Karen is currently sharpening her horticultural skillset to get a more consistent supply – freeze drying the berries extends the shelf life to approximately two years.

“It’s not about making money,” says Karen. “It’s about working towards a healthier society, easing the burden and alleviating the pain of illness. We’ve all known someone or had someone in our families with cancer, myself included. If we can help people with

something that nature and circumstance have given us, then that’s a life well lived.”

“We came up here to retire on a mangosteen farm,” says Chris. “But there’s over 400,000 people in Australia with cancer, and 85% of them have smell and taste issues because of their associated treatments. That’s a lot of people who need help.”

rubyberry.net.au

“IT’S ABOUT ... EASING THE BURDEN AND ALLEVIATING THE PAIN OF ILLNESS”

