

Plant of the Month

I think it's time to answer the age old question, "Is a tomato a fruit or a vegetable?" The truth is, to a botanist the question is meaningless, since *a vegetable* is not a botanical term. The botanist will tell you that any plant product containing seeds is a fruit, including eggplant and zucchini! From a culinary perspective, however, there is a clear difference between fruit and vegetables. No cook or grocery shopper wants to be told that chili peppers are fruit, so he'd better give up the idea that a tomato is anything but a vegetable.

Ok, so the question has been answered. Unless you're in the laboratory, tomatoes and their relatives eggplant, peppers, and potatoes are all vegetables. All? Not quite. As it turns out, tomatoes and eggplant have some very close relatives that are grown as fruit all over Latin America and in other tropical/subtropical climates.



The naranjilla (*Solanum quitoense*) plant looks very much like an eggplant with thorns, but its fruit looks more like a fuzzy orange golfball. The tart fruit is very popular in South America for juice and jams. Being from 3000 feet and higher in the Andes, it may struggle through the summer months in the Tampa Bay area, but it will produce fruit here in the winter. I saw it fruiting recently at Selby Botanical Gardens. Its Andean origin also means that it will tolerate a light frost. It likes frequent water, but may be



better in a container because of susceptibility to nematodes. In its natural habitat it reaches heights of 6 to 10 feet.



The pepino melón, pepino dulce, or melon pear (*Solanum muricatum*), is a smaller growing plant with larger, sweeter fruit that is eaten fresh. The flavor is similar to honeydew melon, with a touch of pear. Also from the Andes, it can also tolerate a very light frost, but requires rich soil and a little staking to keep the fruit off the ground. It is susceptible to white fly and mealy bug.

The tamarillo, or tree tomato (*Cyphomandra betacea*), is a small tree that produces loads of tart, red fruit. Very popular in Australia, the fruit is generally eaten cooked with some sugar. Another Andean native, it will tolerate temperatures down to 26 degrees for a short time. The tamarillo requires fertile, well-drained soil, but lots of water. The leaves are large and heart-shaped, and the flowers are fragrant, so it makes an attractive addition to the garden.

