

'Skinner' Balata
Manilkara bidentata cv. Skinner
by Crafton Clift

I would rate 'Skinner' balata among the ten tastiest fruits of the planet. Yet it is hardly known outside its native Trinidad.

Melissa Parsons, a Collier Fruit Grower, encountered 'Skinner' on the streets of Port of Spain where it looks a lot like longans pulled off their cluster.

When opened with both thumbs, the flesh looks like reddish brown sapodilla, its closest relative, onto which it is readily grafted. Don't try to grow it from seed. There is usually only one seed - not flat like sapodilla, but fat - like a butterpea.

Until the mid '70's (half a century ago), latex from wild Manilkara trees (chicle) was used for chewing gum. Old trees still bear v-shaped scars in Belize.

A couple of decades ago Maurice Kong, president of Miami's Rare Fruit Council, asked me about the fruit quality of balata.

"You can't eat those things. They're like last ~~week's~~ week's chewing gum," I told him.

Maurice had been communicating with someone in Trinidad who had told him about the 'Skinner' balata and Maurice asked me to bring back scions when I went to Trinidad with Rolando dal Pezzo of Homestead, FL.

Rolando grew up in Italy with a friend who was living in Trinidad. This friend picked us up at the airport and whisked us off to his house on the north coast where sea turtles were nesting in the dark. Next day the driver left the door open on the car while he rushed to the front door of a friend's house. I was enjoying watching waves crash against the base of the cliff when the car starting moving. The harder I tried to reach the brakes, the more the seatbelt restrained me.

There was a lot of talk about going to Dr. Skinner's farm, but I had never heard of him and didn't get excited until I had spent a couple of hours looking at 2,000 tropical fruit trees he had grafted with Rare Fruit Council International of Australia. Rolando and his friend were ready to leave,

but I wasn't going anywhere. Besides, Dr. Skinner had already asked if I would overnight and go with him to the botanic garden the next day where he was meeting with government officials to make his farm an international repository of tropical fruit germplasm.

Next day we were waiting behind a long table in a conference room and I was wondering what I'm doing here - he shouldn't be nervous trying to get his plants into permanent care. I was remembering such a conference table at the Miami, USDA where I was the only person on one side and all the PhD's of the USDA staff were on the other side and I was complaining that if you had the guts to ask the plant introduction station for a seed or a scion, all you got was a foot in the face.

The swinging double doors to the conference room burst open with a crowd of people and I jumped to my feet, yelling.

"Ingrid! I haven't seen you since the University of Florida, 25 years ago!"

Later in the day, Ingrid took me through a gate in the garden fence to the President's back yard and gave me a cutting of his double Warszewiczia coccinea, Trinidad's national flower.

Back to Dr. Skinner. During the cold war, he and his Yugoslavian wife moved to Kenya. The Kenyans never could tell him the name of snakes so Dr. Skinner wrote a book to identify snakes of Kenya. They went to Australia in the height of the hippie era.

If you are old enough to remember when Nixon went to China, you've seen Dr. Skinner in China. Remember how the Western world watched tv so eagerly to find out what China was like after the long disconnect. Western doctors thought acupuncture was hocus-pocus. The nervous system mapped like the 12 rivers of china. Five American doctors and international tv saw a Chinese heart surgeon holding his patient's heart in his hand and talking to her. Dr. Skinner was one of those 5 doctors.

After Dr Skimmer brought his fruit trees to Trinidad from Australia, one day he gave a hitch-hiker a ride. When he was returning to the main highway, he stopped to taste the balata on the drive. It didn't taste like last week's chewing gum, but if you grow it from seed, it will.