

Make it Macadamias

Another Delicious Plant Food

By Kay Bushnell

In my drawer lies a small, smooth brown object the shape and size of a marble. It is a souvenir from a trip to Hawaii that I took many years ago. Inside its hard shell there may still lie a rich, sweet, buttery macadamia nut, Over the years this tough, little nut has resisted many attempts to crack it open.

Directions tell me that if I place the nut on cement, preferably with a groove to brace the nut, strike it firmly (not smash it) with a hammer and watch for flying debris, I should be able open it. The only flying object has been the uncracked nut itself as it skittered away, usually leaving me with bruised fingers. I am told that the shell is most easily cracked with a metalworking bench vice. Even if I had a metalworking bench vice and used it, however, I would risk crushing the kernel, too. Considering the difficulty in cracking macadamia nuts, I understand why they are somewhat costly. Nowadays commercial growers use tapered turning steel drums to provide the three hundred pounds of force required to crack the shell. New strains of macadamias developed within the last twenty years that have softer shells have helped to reduce the price of this delicious but still sturdy little nut.

As a native Australian bush nut, the macadamia has had number of aboriginal names. It acquired its common contemporary name when botanist Ferdinand Von Mueller named it after his friend, Dr. John Macadam. Unfortunately Dr. Macadam died aboard ship en route to New Zealand and may never have tasted his namesake nut. The first cultivated macadamia tree was planted in Queensland, Australia in 1858, and the first macadamia orchard in 1888. Shortly before 1900 enterprising orchardists transported macadamia trees to Hawaii, where the volcanic soil, warmth, ample moisture, and lack of insect pests led to bountiful crops.

Today Australia and Hawaii are the leading producers of macadamia nuts. They are the only food from native plants that Australia exports in significant quantity. Smaller numbers of macadamia trees produce nuts in California, Brazil, Israel, Kenya, and South Africa.

The macadamia tree begins to bear at about 7-12 years of age and can continue for one hundred years. As the nut matures the green husk splits open and falls to the ground from late autumn to spring. The nuts are gathered from the ground because shaking the trees will also dislodge the immature nuts and weaken the trees' roots. Most macadamia nuts sold locally are already shelled and ready to be roasted or eaten raw. If you want roasted macadamias, roast them in a baking pan in a 350° oven for about 12 minutes. Then reduce the heat to 250°, and turn them often until they are a light brown in color. Store both raw and roasted macadamias in an airtight container in the freezer to prevent rancidity.

The late Gene Spiller, Ph .D., of Los Altos, was a noted researcher of nuts and their health benefits. His book, *Healthy Nuts*, illuminates many aspects of nut nutrition that are very helpful to the plant-based cook in planning tasty and nutritionally balanced meals. All nuts store within them a powerful array of nutrients that the parent plant needs to reproduce itself. Macadamia nuts contain more palmitoleic acid, a fatty acid, than any other nuts, making them the nuts with the highest percentage of monounsaturated fat. They also contain respectable amounts of protein, fiber, folic acid, potassium, and calcium.

By keeping small bags of raw macadamia and other nuts in our freezers we can add depth of flavor to our plant-based dishes. Just a few nuts eaten alone, blended into our soups, or ground into our sauces or stir-fried dishes endow them with a richness of taste and texture that defies definition.

You'll find that you can use macadamias in recipes that call for other nuts – cookies, cakes, breads, pies, salads, pesto, and many different kinds of soups (see accompanying recipe.) For something different and tasty, try a sandwich of creamy, mild macadamia butter and jelly. Enjoy enriching your sustainable all-plant-based diet with macadamia nuts as well as other, more common nuts.

An important caveat: please don't give macadamia nuts to your dog. Macadamias can be toxic to dogs, according to a study by Steven R. Hansen, D.V.M.

Loma Prieta Chapter member Kay Bushnell has taught plant-based cooking and appeared as the Garden Gourmet in a community-access television cooking series.