Cashew Nuts: Packed with Goodness!

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Cashew nut, a rich and succulent product of the cashew tree, has gained popularity all over the world. Whether salted, sugared, roasted or covered in chocolates, the cashew nut is often used as a flavorful complement to appetizers and finds its place in main dishes and desserts. With a mix of nutrients and minerals not found in many common foods, cashew nuts have been used to promote wellness for centuries.

Cashew nuts, native to equatorial South America, are actually seeds found growing on the end of the cashew apple. Known by the botanical name Anacardium occidentale (Anacardium refers to the shape of fruit, which looks like an inverted heart, cardium means heart), the cashew is a close relative of mangoes, pistachios, poison ivy and poison oak. It was first introduced on a worldwide scale including India by Portuguese explorers in the latter half of the 16th century.

The Cashew Tree

The cashew nut tree is a small spreading evergreen tree sometimes reaching a height of 12-15 metres. In India, it is naturalized in the warmer parts especially near the sea, growing along the east and west of the southern regions, far north as Ratanagiri on the west and Mahanadi delta on the east. Cashew trees are mostly found to grow wild on drier and sandy soils.

The cashew tree possesses a thick and tortuous trunk and branches are wound and twirling frequently reaching the ground. The leaves are about 10-12 centimetres long. Hermaphrodite flowers, borne on 15 to 25 centimetres long terminal panicle, are small and yellow coloured with pink stripes. The fruit is a kidney shaped nut, 2-5 centimetres long, borne on 5-7.5 centimetres long pyriform and fleshy receptacle called the cashew apple.

Rich Cashew Nut

The cashew nut fruit is a rich source of vitamins, containing five times more vitamin C than oranges. They have high amount of mineral salts and other essential nutrients. The volatile compounds in the fruit include carboxylic acid, esters and terpenes. A group of plant chemicals that have documented biological activity like tannins are found in the bark and leaves of cashew. In the shells of the cashew nut, high concentrations of anacardic acids are also found.

Other chemicals found in the cashew tree are alanine, anacardic acids, arabinose, alpha-catechin, alpha-linolenic acid, gallic acid, gingkol, glucuronic acid, leucine, linoleic acid, oleic acid, oxalic acid, palmitic acid, stearic acid and tannin, among many others.

High nutritive snacks, juices and fruit extracts are formulated from the fruits of cashew tree. Now, these fruits are

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Some Other Uses of Cashew Tree

- Leaves and barks of the cashew tree are used to kill germs and bacteria, reduce blood pressure, fever and inflammation.
- The shell oil around the nut is used medicinally and has industrial applications in the plastics and resin industries for its phenol content.
- Timber of cashew tree, which is reddish brown and fairly hard and heavy with close grains, is used in furniture making, boat building, packing cases, country boats, tea-chest and in the production of charcoal.
- Stems exude a clear gum called cashawa gum used in pharmaceuticals and as substitute for gum arabic.

Cashew nut tree
Cashew fruit, being rich in vitamin C and mineral salts, is used as a catalyst in the treatment of premature aging of the skin and to re-mineralize the skin. It is also an effective scalp conditioner and tonic and is often used in shampoos, lotions, and scalp creams for the conditioning activity of its proteins and mucilage.

Health Benefits
Cashew nuts have a high content of monounsaturated fats, antioxidants, magnesium, calcium and copper. Monounsaturated fats promote good cardiovascular health because they reduce high triglyceride levels associated with increased risk of heart disease. Antioxidants in cashew nut helps eliminate free radicals that may cause cancer. Magnesium in the cashew fruit works with calcium to support healthy muscles and bones in the body. Copper micronutrient is essential in energy production, and is required for greater flexibility in blood vessels, bones and joints.

In addition, cashew nuts help in the promotion of normal sleep patterns in menopausal women and have high energy density and high amount of dietary fiber, both have been reported to attribute helpful effects on weight management. Eating cashew nut helps the body to utilize iron, eliminate free radicals, develop bone and connective tissue and produces the skin and hair pigment melanin.

Prospects Of Cashew Nut In India
Cashew constitutes an important foreign exchange earning crop of the country. India holds a virtual monopoly in international cashew trade. The export promotion council through vigorous drive has established many foreign markets in past decades to export the cashew kernels to USA, USSR, Netherlands, Germany, UK, Japan, Belgium, Bahrain and other countries to earn foreign exchange. Research on the cashew has been promoted at various institutes and established centres for the development of high quality fruits and to reduce the environmental stresses and to boost its business on a very large scale within and outside the nation.

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