**Raseela Rasbhari**

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(Photos: Dipanjan Ghosh)

The fruit in its unripe state

**SHORT FEATURE**

**Native** to South America, English colonisers were so much in love with its taste that, in 1774 they began to cultivate this plant in England. From there it travelled to South Africa, Australia, New Zealand and South East Asia and later was widely introduced to Central America, United States, China, India and Malaysia.

The popular fruit is known as ‘Physalis’ but the more widely circulated names are ‘Golden berry’ and ‘Cape Gooseberry’.

Cape gooseberry probably arrived to India by way of Rio de Janeiro. It has numerous vernacular names such as ‘Kuntali’ in Sanskrit, ‘Rashbhari’ and ‘Maccoi’ in Hindi, ‘Teypari’ in Bengali, ‘Phopati’ in Marathi, ‘Thol Thakkali’ in Tamil, ‘Bude Hanu’ in Kannada and ‘Buddabusara’ in Telugu.

A highly adaptable plant, Rashbhari can grow in full sun to partial shade, along roads, back yards and open fields. Its mature fruit looks like a small, round yellowish tomato. Some larger fruits growing to the size of a golf ball, while smaller ones growing to the size of a marble.

The Rashbhari fruit has a mildly tart flavour and is sweet with pleasing earthy undertones making it ideal for snacks, pies, or jams and as an elaborate decorative garnish. Its juice explodes upon biting into the glossy, fleshy skin. Perfectly ripe fruits require no sugar, and some claim the sweetness parallels grapes. Rashbhari has many soft, edible seeds that don’t require removal.

Apart from being tasty, Rashbhari is also full of nutrition. According to USDA, every 100g of Rashbhari contains moderate amount of carbohydrates (11.2 g), proteins (2.6 g), vitamins (Vitamin C 15.4 mg, Vitamin B1 0.15 mg, and Vitamin B3 3.92 mg) and minerals (Phosphorus 40 mg, Calcium 13 mg and Iron 1.4 mg) while other nutrients like fat (0.7 g) are negligible. The fruit is low in calories (53 K Cal) but rich in fructose and pectin and has adequate amount of polyphenols, with anolides, melatonin and carotenoids. The seed oil consists of fatty acids (mainly linoleic acid and oleic acid) and phytosterols (mainly betasitosterol and campesterol).

Being a low calorie fruit and rich in fructose content, it is good for diabetic patients. Higher amount of ascorbic acid (Vitamin C) present in Rashbhari, helps to eliminate free radicals and oxidative stress. It can also boost cognitive ability in kids, increasing memory, focus, and concentration skills. Thiamin (Vitamin B1) produces acetylcholine, a neurotransmitter that transmits messages. Another vitamin Niacin (Vitamin B3) plays a role in increasing the blood flow throughout the body. Moreover, daily consumption of Rashbhari fulfils the daily requirement of iron, calcium and phosphorus and exerts an overall protective effect on the body.

Due to its delicious taste, Cape gooseberry is used in fruit salads, desserts, puddings, ice creams, sauces, chutneys and glazes for meat.
and sea food. In making of salads, Cape gooseberry is used with apple and honey. Rasbhari is also popular in making attractive sweets dipped in chocolate or other coatings or pricked and rolled in sugar.

However, the unripe fruit is supposed to be toxic to some people as it contains mildly poisonous alkaloids. Waiting until the fruit fully ripens reduces the amount of these poisons. Sometimes, it may cause allergy after consumption. The whole plant is assumed to have caused illness as well as death in cattle in Australia.

Rasbhari is used in traditional medicine as antibiotic, antipyretic, anticancer and immune modulator, and also for diseases like dermatitis, hepatitis, leukaemia, malaria, and rheumatism. Leaf decoction of Cape gooseberry is taken as a diuretic and anti-asthmatic in Colombia. Heated leaves are usually applied as poultices on inflammations in South Africa. To relieve abdominal disorders in children, Zulus of South Africa administer the leaf infusion as an antidote. Rural and aboriginal people of our country commonly have been using this plant in various disorders for years. For instance, the Muthuvan tribes living in the Shola forest of Kerala-Tamil Nadu border regions use Rasbhari against jaundice.

Cape gooseberries have some therapeutic uses which are clinically proven. Due to the presence of phytochemicals such as polyphenols and carotenoids and suitable percentage of potassium, Rasbhari controls high blood pressure and also wards off atherosclerosis. The vitamin A present in it, is good for eyes, prevents the formation of cataracts, and protects muscular degeneration. Rasbhari has many soft, edible seeds that don't require to be removed at the time of eating.

Moreover, Cape gooseberries have anti-inflammatory and antioxidant properties and researches in Taiwan have found that fruit extracts inhibit lung cancer cell growth. Presence of withanolides alkaloids and flavonoids in the root extract suggests that Rasbhari can be employed against kidney and liver fibrosis.

It’s hard to say why Cape gooseberries are not more popular – they are one of the easiest fruits to grow, as they adapt to a variety of climates and elevations and can withstand tough shipping conditions.