



Josephine Bacon

FRUIT OF THE GLORIOUS TREE

The custom of waving the *arba minim* (four species) during Sukkot (Tabernacles), which include the myrtle and willow and the palm frond, dates back to Biblical times, when the ceremony was performed in the Temple. The three branches are fairly common species, even outside the Middle East, but the fourth component, the strange-looking fruit resembling a knobby, rough-skinned lemon with very thick pith, is far less familiar. The fruit is described in the Bible as *etz pri hadar*, (Lev. 23:40) the word “hadar” being translated as “goodly” or sometimes “beautiful”. Taking the word *hadar* in its context elsewhere in the Bible, I believe that it really ought to be translated as “glorious”. What could be more glorious-looking than this large, bright yellow citrus fruit, gleaming among the glossy green leaves of the tree, when it fruits in deepest winter?

The citron is the oldest citrus fruit to be known outside its native habitat, yet there is no certainty as to where it originally grew wild. The greatest citrus expert of all time, Shmuel Tolkowsky, who also happened to be a Zionist pioneer, wrote the first authoritative book in English about the history of citrus, published in 1938 (later translated into Hebrew). Tolkowsky believed that the citron originated in the southern tip of the Arabian peninsula in the area known as Hadramaut. If so, then it grew closer to the Near East than all other citrus varieties which originated in India and South-East Asia. This would account for it being the first to reach Persia (the Latin name of the fruit, *Citrus medica*, refers to the Medes) in around 500 b.c. Tolkowsky’s book was called *Hesperides* in reference to the “golden apples” of Greek mythology that grew in the Garden of Hesperides. The word “apple” was given to fruit of any kind in Greek and Latin and it is believed by many classicists that the Golden Apples of Hesperides were, in fact, citrons. Since the citron was the most beautiful and highly-prized fruit of its time and would have been a great novelty in the time of Leviticus, it is not surprising that it became a symbol of the Sukkot harvest festival.

The citron has the most variable shape and size of all citrus fruits. When mature, it may be as small as a lemon (those exported for Sukkot are deliberately kept small, of

course) or as big as a rugby ball and similar in shape. There is another, extraordinary-looking version of the citron known as The Hand of Buddha in which the segments are external, so that the fruit looks like a bunch of long, green fingers. The citron type required for the *arba minim* must be the *etrog* type, which must be grown from an ungrafted tree (other commercially grown citrons are grafted onto hardier root stocks, the citron being particularly sensitive to frost) and the *pitma* (literally, nipple, the withered flower) should still be intact on the end opposite the stem. While citrons are now imported for Sukkot mainly from Israel, this year is a *shnat shmitta* (fallow year) so they will probably be imported to the UK from Morocco, Italy and even the Yemen.

Before *etrog* cultivation became possible in Eretz Israel, *etrogim* were mainly imported from the island of Corfu to Europe, a custom that began as early as the days of the Second Temple. The mistake made by the island’s Jews, however, is that they did not cultivate the fruit themselves, but left it to local farmers. In 1875, the Corfu growers formed a cartel and drastically increased the price, thinking the Jews would have no option but to pay. This caused the *etrog* to be largely imported from elsewhere, especially Corsica and Diamante in Calabria, a city which has even given its name to the citron variety grown there. This variety of *etrog* is also known as the Yanova (Genoa) *etrog*, since the Jews of Eastern Europe confused the port of shipping with the growing centre.

The pith of the citron is very thick and the juice is sparse and slightly bitter, but it has a wonderful fragrance and is used in South-East Asia as a natural air-freshener (keep your *etrog* in your car, it will get rid of all those petrol smells!). The citron may be a rarity outside Sukkot, but it was once grown for its juice, which can still be made into refreshing citronade, known in Italy as *cedrata*. Nowadays, the citron is prized for its thick peel which makes the best candied peel of any fruit for use in cakes and confectionery. Candied citrons are exported from Corsica, Diamante and Puerto Rico (for the U.S.), but you can also make them at home. Here is a recipe for using leftover *etrogim* after Sukkot:

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