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### Sandy and the Sabbath

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Dates are an ancient fruit with many uses.



Dates are low in sodium but rich in potassium.

## Let's Have a Date

BY WINSTON J. CRAIG

**T**he tall, graceful date palm has been cultivated extensively since ancient times. Dates have been a staple food of the Middle East for thousands of years. Date palms were introduced into California by the Spaniards by 1765. Both the English name, as well as the Latin species name *dactylifera*, come from the Greek word *dáktulos* meaning “finger,” because of the fruit’s elongated cylindrical shape.

Dates are mentioned in the Bible and in many places in the Quran. The righteous were compared to a tall flourishing palm tree. In Jewish tradition the date palm is a symbol of fertility. Today, date palms grow abundantly in the Jordan Valley, the Aravah and along the Dead Sea.

There are hundreds of varieties of dates, which can be eaten fresh or dried. The fruit is dark-brown, reddish or yellowish-brown when ripe, depending on the variety. Mature date palms can produce more than 200 pounds of dates per year, although they do not all ripen at the same time. Medjool, originally from Morocco, is a very popular variety of date from California.

The date palm is a very useful plant, and virtually every part of the palm tree is utilized. The trunk is used for timber, and the mature leaves for roofing, mats, rope and baskets. The fruit is utilized for sweets and the seeds for animal feed. Date pits are also used as fuel. The oil from the date seeds is suitable for use in soap and cosmetics. Date palm sap is used to make palm syrup.

Dates are a high-energy source, being rich in simple carbohydrates (glucose, fructose and sucrose). Just five dates contain about 120 calories. In addition, they contain a use-



ful three grams of fiber. They contain very little fat and no cholesterol. Dates contain no sodium but have high levels of potassium, a desirable situation for those wanting to manage high blood pressure levels. Dates also provide small amounts of vitamins and trace elements such as iron, copper, manganese and zinc.

In the Middle East, dates are used to prepare date palm syrup, a sweet spread similar to honey, produced by boiling dates in water. Dates may be stuffed with fillings such as almonds, walnuts, cardamom, candied orange, tahini, marzipan or cheese. Dates are used in a variety of sweet dishes, cookies, cereals, cakes and puddings. Ground, dehydrated dates can be processed into date sugar. Young date leaves and the terminal bud are cooked and eaten as a vegetable. The flowers and buds of the date palm can be used in a salad.

Unripe dates have a high tannin content, and their astringency is used in traditional medicine to treat intestinal problems. Ancients also used dates as a laxative. As an infusion, syrup or paste, dates have been administered for sore throats, colds, bronchial problems and other complaints.

Winston Craig, Ph.D., RD, is a professor of nutrition at Andrews University.