

# Sacred, Beautiful – and Fair Game for the Kitchen Table (Originally appeared in Phuket Magazine)

by Michael Moore

Egyptians, Hindus and Buddhists revere the lotus plant and its lovely blossoms. For Buddhists the plant and its stately flowers – which invariably rise in grandeur from muddy ponds and humble surroundings – are a poignant sign of purity in an impure world, making the lotus a powerful symbol in a religion that places great significance on symbolism.

The Thais, ninety percent of whom are Theravada Buddhists, hold the plant in particularly high esteem and use it in a significant way in variety religious and cultural ceremonies. This exalted status, however, doesn't prevent them from viewing the lotus plant as fair game for the kitchen table and a culinary treat to be eaten in an astounding number of ways.

Other cultures, like the Chinese and Japanese, eat lotus plants, but the Thais easily win the sweepstakes for culinary diversity. All of the plant – rhizomes, stems, leaves, pollen, flowers and seeds – is eaten, and it is used to make snacks, condiments, toppings, main courses and desserts. And in times past, when a meal was finished, the petals from lotus blossoms would be used as a wrapper for an after dinner cigarette!

The type of lotus significant to Buddhists is native to India, Southeast Asia and parts of China. Called *bua luang* or *rak bua* in Thai, it is characterized, and distinguishable from other lotus plants, by its pink or white flowers and round leaves that are covered with microscopic hairs. In addition to being found in ponds, containers and ornamental gardens throughout Thailand, it is – because of the great demand for its blossoms – grown commercially in vast ponds like those that can be seen along the highway leading from Bangkok to Nakhorn Pathom.

*Bua luang* belong to the *Nymphaeaceae* family, a group of plants commonly called “water lilies” in English, but invariably referred to as lotus plants by Thais in their translations into English. There are three categories of plants within the family: *Nelumbo*, *Nymphaea* and *Nuphar*, but only the first two categories are common in Thailand. The *bua luang* belongs to the *Nelumbo* category and is known as a *Nelumbo nucifera* by botanists.

*Nymphaea* varieties are also found in Thailand and the specie most commonly seen is referred to as *bua sai*. Like the sacred lotus, it also produces pink and white flowers, but the petals are narrower and the blossoms more rounded. In recent years new *Nymphaea* varieties with yellow and purple flowers have been introduced and they are popular in ornamental gardens, but they aren't referred to as *bua sai* and aren't eaten.

The fresh or dried seeds of the sacred lotus are a popular snack and the latter can readily be found in cellophane packs in supermarkets and small shops. In addition to being snacked upon when raw or dried, the seeds of the sacred *bua luang* find their way into numerous dishes. *Nam met bua* is a drink made by soaking dried seeds until they are soft. The seeds are also mashed and stuffed into moon cakes either on their own or when mixed with the infamous durian. They are also a popular topping for the ice cream sold by street vendors throughout Thailand. When mixed with red bean paste, they are poured over crushed ice to create the popular dessert *met bua tua daeng*.

The Thais, like other groups in the Orient, eat the tuber – more accurately the rhizome – of both the sacred lotus and the less renowned *bua sai*. The tuber, which is easily identified by the pattern of holes that appear when it is cut crosswise, is often peeled and eaten raw after being dipped in one of the country's numerous spicy dipping sauces. It is also peeled, sliced and stir fried with pork or shrimp, providing a crunchy and tasty contrast to the other ingredients. It sometimes makes its way into delicious coconut curries containing fish and shrimp.

Like the seeds, the tuber is an ingredient in several sweet dishes. In *rak bua chuam* it is preserved with sugar and then poured over ice. This popular dish, like the *met bua tua daeng* mentioned earlier, can easily be found at places serving traditional Thai sweets that are poured over ice or served with sweetened coconut milk.

The *bua luang* is eaten in a variety of additional ways. The stalk terminating in the flower, for example, is boiled with coconut milk and then dipped in a spicy dipping sauce. It can also be fried or put in a well known curry called *gaeng som sai bua*. Young leaves are sometimes added to curries, and the older leaves are used to wrap rice and other ingredients that are being steamed.

If the foregoing seems too esoteric and of little practical value to you, perhaps you will find this use for the leaves of the sacred lotus helpful. For centuries Thais in rural areas have used the sacred lotus to protect them from the sun. Large leaves

with long strong stems are often fashioned into little parasols for protection against the sun's harsh rays.

Many older Thais treat lotus plants as a part of their repertoire of medicinal herbs. Virtually all parts of the versatile plants are used, including pollen, flowers, stems, tubers and leaves. The sacred lotus is particularly valued for its medicinal properties. The pollen is thought to help eliminate vertigo and dizziness. Eating the tubers gives one a sweet and good smell and alleviates diarrhea in children. The green, bitter embryo of the seed is believed to reduce phlegm, thirst and heat inside the body.

Bua sai are also used in medicinal applications. Many Thais believe its flowers are good for the heart, make people strong and eliminate heat in the body. They have also found that it makes pregnant women feel better.

The lotus plant is sacred to the Thais and plays an important role in religious and cultural ceremonies. This does not, however, prevent it from being used as a food, cigarette wrapper, herbal remedy, and when necessary, as an umbrella. As you travel around Thailand, observe the culture and the way it uses what nature has given it. What you see will be interesting, unique and quintessentially Thai.

## **Nutritional Information Per 100 Grams**

### Raw Seeds

88 calories

5.2 gm protein

0.5 gm fat

16.1 gm carbohydrates

1.1 gm fiber

76 mg calcium

164 mg phosphorus

1.4 mg iron

1.8 mg niacin

0.15 mg Vitamin B<sub>1</sub>

0.06 mg Vitamin B<sub>2</sub>

10 mg Vitamin C

Boiled Seeds

157 calories

10.3 gm protein

0.5 gm fat

27.8 gm carbohydrates

0.1 gm fiber

334 mg calcium

1.8 mg phosphorus

31 I.U. Vitamin A

0.05 mg Vitamin B<sub>1</sub>

Tuber

49 calories

1.7 gm protein

0.1 gm fat

11.3 gm carbohydrates

21 mg calcium

0.4 mg iron

0.05 mg Vitamin B<sub>1</sub>

22 mg Vitamin C

Stalk (*sai bua*)

8 calories

0.3 gm protein

1.8 carbohydrates

0.4 gm fiber

8 mg calcium

15 mg phosphorus

0.5 mg iron

45 I.U. Vitamin A

0.02 mg Vitamin B<sub>1,2</sub>

0.4 mg niacin

15 mg Vitamin C