At this time of year, my taste buds are ready for some tropical fruit! Nothing will do quite like a lychee. While citrus are a popular backyard fruit in our area and tend to be the number one fruit-bearing plant installed in the average landscape, lychees are something to take another look at. Some gardeners may be a little hesitant to try something different, but isn't that part of the fun of gardening? While not for everyone (considering some climate hardiness issues), the lychee will provide a look and taste unlike any other fruit.

The lychee is an attractive evergreen tree that can grow up to 40 feet tall. While the flowers are small and insignificant in appearance, the fruit is very showy, up to one and one-half inches in diameter, and yellow, pinkish or red in color. A leathery rough skin encloses the whitish pulp that surrounds a large brown seed. Don't let the pebbly skin deter you from getting to the white flesh underneath! The skin is removed before eating the pulp and the seed is then discarded. The flavor of the flesh is hard to describe and it is unlike any other fruit. Once you taste one, you will be hooked and want more!

If you want to try to grow a lychee, the first item to keep in mind is our climate. While not common, I have seen lychee in Charlotte County of some size and bearing fruit. Lychees are best grown along the coast in our area and special micro-climates that are normally warmer than average elsewhere. The lychee is more cold tolerant the mango, but still has a temperature limit that should act as a guide. A young lychee will be damaged by temperatures from 28-32 degrees F. Several hours at 24-25 degrees F can damage or kill...
large trees. We can on occasion get these low temperatures in Charlotte County away from the coast, so plant appropriately. If you find a good spot to plant, (including microclimates), the weather the rest of the year in our area is ideal - dry, cool winters and hot humid summers.

Select a spot that is in full sun with well-drained soil conditions. Lychees are moderately drought tolerant once established and can withstand flooding for a short period of time. If poor drainage is an issue, consider planting on a mound or bed about three feet high and 10 feet wide in diameter that will elevate the tree above the wet areas. Plant the lychee at least 30 feet from buildings, wires and other trees. No fertilizer is required at planting, but once new growth is noticed, use a slow-release fertilizer formulated for tropical fruits as per label instructions. Micronutrient applications may also be advisable. Water regularly for establishment and from flowering through harvest for best fruit production and quality. A two to three inch mulch of organic matter (such as well-cured compost) from the drip-line to about 12 inches from the trunk is also beneficial.

Cultivar selection may be limited to what is available at local nurseries. Lychee suitable for home cultivation include 'Brewster', 'Emperor', 'Mauritius', 'Sweet Cliff', and 'Bosworth 3'. Mature lychee varies greatly in annual fruit production which can range on average from 50-125 pounds per tree.

The lychee fruit is harvested by cutting the cluster of ripe fruits. Make sure that they are ripe before picking as they will not ripen off the plant. As we get into the season (mid-May to early July), look around and see if you can spot this fruit tree in your neighborhood - maybe a neighbor will share some! Locally, Pine Island in Lee County is another spot to see these trees and purchase some of the fruit to sample.

Resource: