

## **CARAMBOLAS ARE A DELICIOUS FRUIT FOR THE BACKYARD**

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By Ralph E. Mitchell

Whether you call it carambola, star fruit or five-finger, the fruit tree known scientifically as *Averrhoa carambola* is exotic, tasty, and makes a nice ornamental yard tree. Originally from Southeast Asia, the carambola has been grown in Florida for over one hundred years and is commercially produced in Dade, Lee, Broward, and Palm Beach counties. This fruit is commonly seen in produce departments in most grocery stores and is familiar to almost everyone. Why not try this tree fruit in your own back yard?

First, let me quote word for word from our UF/IFAS publication, "People who have been diagnosed with kidney disease should not eat carambola (star fruit) unless their doctor says it is safe for them to eat. This fruit may contain enough oxalic acid to cause a rapid decline in renal function." Please keep this important warning in mind. The carambola tree is small to medium in size, evergreen to semi-evergreen depending on winter temperatures and may have a single or multiple trunks. The small, but colorful pink to lavender flowers are about three-eighths of an inch long. The flowers are followed by a fleshy waxy berry from two to six-inches long with five lobbed ribs that appear star-shaped when cut in cross-section. It takes about seventy-five days from the time the fruit sets until it is ready to pick. There are also about twelve edible seeds per fruit.

Carambolas really appreciate being protected from windy sites. As a matter of fact, wind-damaged trees will show browning or distorted leaves, some stem dieback, fruit damage and general stunted growth. Keeping carambola trees pruned to about twelve feet tall will also help increase hurricane resistance. Select a site to plant

your carambola that is in full sun, out of the wind and is well drained. If necessary, plant the tree on a mound of soil to raise it up above areas that sometimes flood. Build the mound three to four foot high and four to ten feet wide using native soil. Carambolas are not tolerant of salty conditions and also may show nutrient deficiencies in high pH soils. As the tree matures, its tolerance to cold and freezing will improve. Generally, at temperatures of twenty to twenty-four degrees Fahrenheit, large branches and even mature trees may die. Accordingly, some protection may be necessary during the coldest of our winter weather.

Carambola normally have two major crops per year ready from August through September and from December through February. There will also be scattered smaller crops. A five-year old tree can produce up to one hundred pounds per tree. Mature trees can eventually supply you with over two-hundred and fifty pounds a year. It is no wonder why carambola tree owners are always giving fruit away to friends and neighbors! A complete fertilizer suitable for tropical fruits used as per label directions will keep the tree productive and healthy. In addition, foliar applications of micronutrients may be needed to ward off deficiencies.

Variety selection is as much an issue of what is available in the local garden centers and what your personal tastes are. Carambolas are either sweet or tart. Some tart varieties will even sweeten up if left on the tree to ripen further. Arkin is a cultivar that originated in Florida, has a sweet flavor and is very well suited for backyard production. Lara is another variety from Florida that is also sometimes available. Local specialty

nurseries and Internet searches may yield other cultivars for sale.

Carambola is a great dooryard fruit tree that is easy to grow and produces an abundance of tasty fruit.

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For more information on all types of tropical fruits, please contact our Master Gardeners on the Plant Lifeline at 941.764.4340 from 1:00pm until 4:00pm Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. Our office is located at 25550 Harbor View Road, Suite 3, in Port Charlotte. Our **Plant Clinics** are available across the county:

- **Demonstration Garden** every Thursday from 9:00am until 11:00am.
- **Englewood/Charlotte Public Library** 9:00am until 12:00pm every Monday.
- **Mid-County Regional Library** 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Thursday of the month from 1:00pm until 3:00pm.
- **Edison College Learning Resources Library** 3<sup>rd</sup> Tuesday of the month from 1:00pm until 4:00pm.
- **South Gulf Cove Learning Garden** 3<sup>rd</sup> Wednesday of each month from 9:00am until 12:00pm.

Monthly **Plant Clinics** are Saturdays from 9:00am until 12:00pm at the following locations:

- **Peachland Promenades Publix** - 2<sup>nd</sup> Saturday of the month.
- **Home Depot Murdock and Home Depot Punta Gorda** - 3<sup>rd</sup> Saturday of the month.

Ralph Mitchell is the County Extension Director/Horticulture Agent for the Charlotte County Cooperative Extension Service. You may contact him by e-mail ([Ralph.Mitchell@charlottefl.com](mailto:Ralph.Mitchell@charlottefl.com)). You may also contact a volunteer Master Gardener from 1:00pm until 4:00pm Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 941.764.4340 or by e-mail ([Master.Gardener@charlottefl.com](mailto:Master.Gardener@charlottefl.com)).

For more information about our Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Program, please contact our FYN Horticulture Program Assistant, Allison Steele, at 941.764.4340. Allison can help educate you about the Florida Yards & Neighborhoods Program so that you can create a beautiful, Florida-Friendly landscape that saves you time and money while conserving precious water resources and reducing pollution.

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*Resource: Crane, J. H. (2007) Carambola Growing in the Florida Home Landscape. The University of Florida Extension Service, IFAS.*