

Anyone Growing Sichuan Peppercorns?

by Al Chomica

In attempts to buy local produce and adhere to a Two Mile Diet as much as possible, my wife, Bonnie, and I found challenges with obtaining salt and pepper locally. The salt aspect was solved by sourcing a local company that creates different sea salts but the pepper was going to be a tough



one because it grows in the tropics. But then, a couple of years ago, on a tour of the Eco-Sense Nursery in Saanich, Gord and Ann Baird gave us a handful of seed from a Sichuan Peppercorn that they had grown. They also had a few nice trees available so we traded a wasabi plant and a few bucks for a specimen. These plants sold for \$38 in a one gallon pot, which I thought was a bit pricey until I discovered how difficult it is to propagate them.

The Sichuan Peppercorn grows wild in China and is also known as the toothache tree or flat-spine prickly ash with a Latin name

of *Zanthoxylum simulans*. These peppercorns are not just hot – they are literally tongue-numbing. Apparently, dentists in China historically used these berries to numb pain and if you ever chew on a berry the side of your face will droop and feel like you have just had an anaesthetic. One lady on a garden tour asked to try a peppercorn and she later said her tongue went numb and she couldn't feel it for an hour. These are serious plants!

Sichuan pepper's unique aroma and flavour is not hot or pungent like black, white, or chili peppers. Instead, it has slight fruity overtones and creates a tingly numbness in the mouth (caused by its 3% of hydroxy alpha sanshool) that sets the stage for hot spices. According to some chefs, they are not simply pungent; "they produce a strange, tingling, buzzing, numbing sensation that is something like the effect of carbonated drinks or of a mild electric current (touching the terminals of a nine-volt battery to the tongue). Sanshools appear to act on several different nerve endings at once, inducing sensitivity to touch and cold in nerves that are ordinarily non-sensitive, and creates a general neurological confusion."



The tree itself is small and pretty but has the most formidable, broad thorns. The leaves are somewhat waxy with little prickles throughout but it is a nice-looking tree with compound leaves and grows about four feet a year. The peppercorns form at the base of the leaf nodes on two-year old wood and it grows to about 20 feet tall.



This plant had an agricultural ban into the USA from 1968 to 2005 because of a bacterial threat called citrus canker. It has just recently been allowed to be imported again if the peppercorns are sterilized by heat, but this would also kill the seed itself. Since this spice is one of the main ingredients of Chinese Five-Spice Powder, I wonder what substitute was used to make the powder, over the decades, when the spice was banned?

The plant is self-fertile and produces clusters of red berries in its second year. When ripe the peppercorns split open and one eats the red, outer husk of the berries leaving a shiny, inedible black seed that one can attempt to sprout. Sichuan Peppercorn sold in stores has had all the black seeds removed.

We have two culinary uses for these peppercorns in our kitchen. One is a wicked Five Spice Powder that compliments almost any dish except fish. And we have a pepper mill filled with the red berries that we grind onto almost every dish we prepare, just like black pepper. It has a unique feature in that it takes on a different flavour with every different dish one makes. It is an incredible spice and a plant of worth that contributes to our culinary enjoyment on a daily basis - and we proudly grow it in our food forest.

Propagating these plants became an interesting experiment after incorporating the berries into our regular daily diet and using it up in great quantity. In two years though, only three seeds successfully sprouted although one healthy specimen mysteriously died after several months of good growth. The seeds are first stratified in a fridge for at least three months then placed in a propagating tray where they are kept moist until they sprout. It usually takes a month or two but only about 1% of the seeds ever sprout so the propagation is quite slow with only one or two plants sprouting in a year.

One little seedling that is now sprouting below sat in the fridge from October to the end of March. It took over six weeks to finally sprout and was the only seed out of 50 or so that came to life. It was carefully transplanted into a one-gallon pot with the best soil available and will be babied for the next few months to ensure its survival. Obviously, my next experiment will be to see if propagation by softwood cuttings will be more successful.