

THE MAGNIFICENT MANDARIN

Making sense of the mandarin's place in the citrus world



You may know a lot about produce, but even experts can get confused about the sections and subsections of our favorite citrus fruits.

Let's break apart the magnificent mandarin.

Here's the juice: Mandarins are a type of orange. Tangerines, clementines and satsumas are all special varieties of mandarin oranges, Ontario Produce Marketing Association's "Produce Made Simple" report says.

Like the name indicates, mandarins originated in China. They are typically smaller than other oranges, the segments are smaller and they tend to taste sweeter. The skin's thickness varies, but it's usually loosely attached to the fruit, making it easier to peel than larger oranges.

And some branded produce companies make it even more delightfully complicated.

Noticeable by its large size and easy-to-peel skin, Sumo Citrus, for example, is a hybrid brand of several varieties including navel, pomelo and mandarin. This company won Best Promotion of 2021 in PMG magazine with its extravagant, whimsical in-store displays nationwide. One of our favorites was a Metropolitan Market display in which two Sumo Citrus fruits were ready to spar on the wrestling mat, surrounded by crowds of Sumo Citrus fans.

Often, the fruits labeled as "mandarins" in supermarkets are actually tangerines.

Now that we've cleared up this level of the orange family tree, let's now

branch out below mandarins with those tangerines, satsumas and clementines (see top right).

In its monthly citrus forecast reports, the USDA lumps tangerines, tangelos and mandarins into one commodity group, focusing on California and Florida, the states producing commercial volumes. This commodity is usually available for the retail market from Oct. 1 to May 15 from California, and Sept. 15 to April 30 from Florida.

Production of tangerines for the 2021-2022 season was expected to be 25% below 2020-2021 levels, at a total of 878,000 tons. High droppage rates and lower yields in Florida can be attributed to the ongoing effects of citrus greening.

The drastic dip in domestic citrus volume, including tangerines,

Photo: iStock

TANGERINES:

People often use the name “tangerine” and “mandarin” interchangeably, but not all mandarins are tangerines, while all tangerines are mandarins. Make sense? They have a slightly deeper red hue and are distinctly larger than satsumas or clementines, but are still smaller than what we normally call an orange. Tangerines typically have a few seeds in each fruit and are sometimes sold in supermarkets with some leaves attached.



SATSUMAS:

These guys are really distinctive, with loose, bumpy skin and a knobby neck that keeps them from being as spherical as the others. Satsumas are smaller than tangerines, like clementines. Their sweet, typically seedless fruit is what makes them popular, but they are also often praised for their hardiness under the canning process, according to the Ontario marketing association. Most canned mandarins are actually canned satsumas.

CLEMENTINES:

Also smaller than tangerines, clementines shine during December holidays. For a while, they were included in children’s Christmas stockings. The skin is easy to peel and sweet, with a thinner skin that holds tighter to the fruit than with satsumas. Often, grocery stores will label both satsumas and clementines as a clementine.

Photo: Farm Journal

means more imports and higher prices compared to last year — an especially unwelcome fact with all the other rising costs and reasons for produce price inflation.

Even so, shoppers love those mandarins.

About 24% of shoppers said they purchased mandarins in the past year, with clementines being the most popular variety, according to PMG’s 2022 Fresh Trends report.

While mandarins follow the typical consumer pattern of being purchased more often by people with more income and older age, women are almost twice as likely to buy them, at 29% of women versus 17% of men. *pmg*

— Amy Sowder

