

Dragon Fruit

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As a Master Gardener, I am always looking for a new plant to grow. In recent years there have been many offers of Dragon Fruit plants. Not a very interesting looking cactus vine and I usually declined the offer. I declined the offers because they came with no information on the variety. Three or four years ago a friend offered some cuttings, an unidentified variety again. He said it was a special variety, although he did not remember why but the fruit was red on outside and red on the inside. That perked my interest. Why special? This began my journey into growing Dragon Fruit. I took the cuttings and began researching how to grow these fruits here in Fort Bend County.

The first information for growing in Fort Bend County: Dragon Fruit plants are tropical, they can only survive in temperatures above 50 degrees. This means it is best grown in a pot and moved indoors when our temperatures drop. Use caution when moving the plant outside after overwintering indoors, the sun can burn the plant. Initially keep it in the shade and gradually move it into dappled sun.

Growing from a cutting: Cut the rooting end, let it dry out for 2 or 3 days and stake it in a good quality soil mix, when new growth appears, it has rooted. Usually 2 to 3 weeks but let it get some good growth before transplanting.

Soil Mix: Always start with a good quality potting mix. Dragon Fruit plants require moisture and good drainage. They do not like “wet feet” (constant moisture will rot the cactus). Look for a mix containing peat moss, compost, perlite, sand.

Trellis: Build your trellis before transplanting, there are many different ideas for Dragon Fruit trellises online (these trellises need to be firmly seated in the pot before adding soil and be able to hold heavy weight). The new growth needs to be trained with garden tape on the trellis, allowing one main stem to grow to the top of the trellis. When the main stem reaches the top, train the branches to drape over the top of the trellis.

Transplanting: Dragon Fruit plants are a vining cactus and need to be grown on a trellis. It is wise to select a large, permanent pot to start off with (nothing with a rounded bottom that may tip over in the wind). The plants will grow rapidly when the warm weather arrives. The plants have thorns and are not easily transplanted when they are larger.

Fruit: Patience is required, it will take possibly up to three years before you get fruit. Until then, train the new growth and keep it trimmed. Top dress with a little compost in the spring. Fertilize with a balanced fertilizer every two to three months. Protect when temperatures drop.

Pollination: When you see your first bud it will take two to three weeks to open. Dragon Fruit buds will open between dusk and dawn. Be prepared to stay up late or get up early before the sun rises. When the bud opens hand pollinate it (In its native environment it is pollinated by bats and nocturnal moths).

Different varieties have different requirements to pollinate:

- Self Fertile – Will pollinate itself, the stigma is close to the anthers (for best results, hand pollination is recommended).
- Self Pollinated – No other variety is needed to pollinate, although it **must be hand pollinated**.
- Self Sterile – You will need a second variety of dragon fruit pollen to produce fruit. It needs to be cross pollinated.



Photo of flower, center stigma is encircled by anthers, carrying the pollen.

In Self Sterile varieties you will notice that the stigma is much longer.

To Pollinate:

Self Fertile and Self Pollinated - With a fine, dry brush, collect the pollen from the anthers and brush it onto the stigma of the flower.

Self Sterile – You must collect pollen from another variety of dragon fruit. If your varieties bloom at different times you can collect the pollen and store it.

Collecting Pollen: Place a large bowl under the blooming flower and brush the pollen into the bowl. The pollen must dry out before storing, so it is important to place it in a dry place for 24 hours before storing. To store, collect the dried pollen and place it into small, air tight containers. Label the containers, seal them and place it into a plastic zip lock bag, add silica packs into the plastic bag, to prevent moisture and freeze. It should remain viable 6-9 months in the freezer.

There are hundreds, if not thousands of varieties of Dragon Fruits, from the tropical regions, all over the world. Have fun growing them.