

THE AÇAÍ BERRY: NATURE'S SUPERFOOD?

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http://www.mercola.com/Downloads/bonus/acai_berry/default.aspx

Sporting a deep purple color and claiming to have the richest store of antioxidants of all known fruits,¹ the Açaí (Ah-sigh-EE) berry was one of the Amazon's hidden treasures ---until recently.

The Açaí berry comes from the Açaí palm (botanical name: *Euterpe oleracea*), also referred to as "The Tree of Life." The Açaí palm is found in the heart of the Brazilian tropical rain forest. The berries, which grow in clumps or clusters similar to grapes, hang from the tops of trees that may reach a height of 60 feet or more.

The Yanomami Indians in Brazil treasured the Açaí for centuries as a food that "holds unique power" – believing it gave energizing sustenance.² Only within the past five years has the berry's popularity spread outside the country, traveling mostly by word of mouth, though its popularity also increased after some landmark studies were published about its amazing antioxidant properties.

Other authorities, such as Dr. Nicholas Perricone, have popularized the berry's many attributes as well. In his book *The Perricone Promise*, Dr. Perricone names the Açaí berry as his number one superfood.³ It was chosen because of its beneficial combination of essential fatty acids, antioxidants, and fiber.

Açaí: One Powerful Antioxidant!

Once the berry was studied by researchers, they discovered that the Açaí contains 300 percent more antioxidants than blueberries or grapes. Its ORAC (Oxygen Radical Absorbance Capacity) value, which is a scientific measurement of its antioxidant capacity, is impressive. Fruits and vegetables generally have the highest ORAC scores.

The higher the score, the higher the antioxidant content.

The number one factor in how a sample of Açaí scores in ORAC is in the processing. A gram of raw Açaí berry off the tree may have an ORAC value over 1,200, but by the time it arrives in your kitchen, that number may likely be under 100!⁴ So keep that in mind if you see different Açaí products claiming to have higher ORAC values. You might want to do a little research to see whether their claims of a higher ORAC value are legitimate.

One source noted that apples have an ORAC of 218, bananas 221, and blueberries 2,400. And the Açaí? The ORAC for fresh Açaí (versus freeze-dried) is a whopping 5,500!⁵ Other sources showed differing ORAC values for these fruits, but in all cases, the Açaí showed the highest value of all. This means that it has the highest antioxidant capacity of any known edible fruit.⁶

Antioxidants, such as those found in the Açaí, have been linked with an increase in youthful health, energy, and stamina, and they help your immune system to operate more efficiently. This means that when you consume foods and nutrients loaded with antioxidants, you're super-charging your body to fight off the effects of pollution, chemicals, and the ever-increasing onslaught of germs, bacteria, and viruses that constantly surround us.

In addition to its role of having the highest amount of antioxidants of any fruit, the Açaí is also packed with other health-giving nutrients. For example, it contains a huge storehouse of essential fatty acids. Nearly 1/3 of the Açaí berry consists of this good kind of fat, 74 percent of it coming from unsaturated fats such as omega 3, omega 6 and omega 9.⁷

Oleic acid, a monounsaturated omega-9 acid, and linoleic acid, a polyunsaturated omega-6 acid, help to lower unhealthy cholesterol (LDL) levels and maintain healthy cholesterol (HDL) levels. These fats also increase the absorption of vitamins like A, E, D, and K, which are important to good health.

The Berry with Heart

Scientists have also discovered that the Açaí berry contains an astonishing amount of essential minerals, which make it a heart-healthy choice.

Each 100 grams contains:

- 11.8 mg. of iron
- 2.4 g. of proteins
- 9 mg. of vitamin C, and
- 58 mg. of phosphorus.⁸

In addition, it contains Vitamins A (1,000 I.U.), B1 (0.36 mg.), B2 (0.01 mg.), B3-Niacin (0.40 mg), and E in every 100 grams.⁹ There is 20 percent of the RDI of Vitamin E in a single serving of Açai.¹⁰

In 2005, one of the first studies on the berry's health benefits showed the Açai's ability to increase heart health. The scientists reported, in the International Journal of Food Sciences and Nutrition, that the berry was rich with compounds called anthocyanins.¹¹ Anthocyanins are the heart-supportive chemicals found in red wine and are also responsible for the bright colors found in flowers and fruits, especially those with a deep red, blue, or purple color.

But Açai berries contain even greater amounts of those chemicals than wine – some report up to 10 to 30 times more --yet without all the potential side effects of alcohol, such as neurotoxicity and addiction. And because the Açai is so rich in calcium, it provides other heart benefits. Studies indicate that people who suffer from high blood pressure often have diets low in calcium.¹² It has been shown that when calcium is added to your diet, your blood pressure drops.

And a new study reports that the anti-oxidant rich juice may also be able to reduce levels of markers of inflammation for conditions such as heart disease.

Researchers reported in the Journal of Agricultural and Food Chemistry that the juice was able to protect cells from oxidative damage, and when consumed by a small number of volunteers, showed anti-inflammatory properties.¹³

Chronic inflammation has been linked to many conditions, including heart disease.

A Potent Disease Fighter

In another Açai study, done in 2006, University of Florida researchers found something startling: they discovered that extracts from the berry “triggered a self-destruct response” in as much as 86 percent of the leukemia cells tested.¹⁴ While researchers cautioned that they didn't want to give false hopes of a looming cure for the disease, they said they were very “encouraged” by the findings.

Stephen Talcott, an assistant professor with University of Florida's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, said,

“This study was an important step toward learning what people may gain from using beverages, dietary supplements, or other products made with the berries.”

The Açai holds out many hopes for those suffering from other diseases as well. Because it has a very low natural sugar content for a fruit¹⁵, it will likely prove to be a good choice for diabetics. And while a number of fruits in their natural state are relatively low in sugar, juice made from the fruits normally contains a much higher sugar concentration, making many doctors caution their diabetic patients to seriously limit juices.

But Açai juice is different. According to Dr. Julian Whitaker,

“Fruit juice has never been high on my list of recommended foods...(but) unlike most juices, most of Acai's calories come not from sugar, but from healthful omega-6 and omega-9 fats.”¹⁶

Protector of Your Immune System

And, because of its high amount of antioxidants, Açai is a natural free radical scavenger. Free radicals damage your body's cells by attacking healthy cells, via a process called oxidation, causing the cells to weaken and become more susceptible to disease. So having these free radicals continually “on the loose” can trigger many different types of diseases in your body.

Antioxidants, such as those in the Açai berry, combat oxidation, so they prevent these scavengers from damaging your immune system.

This means that having enough of them inside you can combat a host of potential diseases, including cancer, coronary heart disease, atherosclerosis, dementia, neurological damage, autoimmune diseases, and many more.

In fact, exciting new discoveries like these have been pushing the little berry more into the spotlight each day. The Açai has been found to have a full array of vitamins, minerals, and trace elements, generous amounts of plant sterols (phytochemicals that contain numerous health benefits), and natural calcium.¹⁷

Açai is also rich in amino acids. This hearty little fruit seems to have it all! Açai contains 19 essential and non-essential amino acids.¹⁸ Amino acids are the building blocks of protein. They assist in the metabolic processes in your body, as well as in muscle development.

Açai Benefits the Elderly

For these reasons and more, the Açai berry holds plenty of advantages for the elderly. Many medical professionals are now advising their older patients to use Açai on a regular basis, since the berry can help slow or even halt premature aging of your brain, and enhance concentration and memory.¹⁹

That means that Açai's formidable combination of nutrients would also be a powerful ally in the fight against the dreaded disease Alzheimer's.

Oxidative damage appears to be responsible for the cognitive and functional decline of Alzheimer's,²⁰ so many researchers now feel that regular use of Açai, with its high antioxidant payload, would slow the progress of the disease.

Another asset for the elderly is Açai's ability to reduce the risk of macular degeneration, the leading cause of blindness in people over the age of 65.²¹

Drinking Açai juice regularly will also make bones stronger and less likely to fracture, as the berry contains cisplatin, which strengthens the membranes that hold bones and joints together.²²

The berry is also very high in natural fiber, containing 44.2 grams per 100 grams of freeze-dried Açai.²³ This generous amount of fiber is a boon to the elderly and anyone experiencing digestion-related issues.

Dropping Those Extra Pounds

But the benefits of Açai's fiber are not just for the elderly. It may also be an effective weight loss tool. While there are no official studies using Açai for weight loss, Açai is fast becoming the center of a growing number of diet plans, including Dr. Mehmet Oz's Açai diet popularized by Oprah Winfrey and Rachel Ray.²⁴ Açai's high-fiber content alone may help you shed some excess weight. Because fiber has little or no calories, it fills you up so you aren't tempted to overeat.

A Sexual PowerHouse?

The Açai is also gaining popularity as a sexual enhancer. Recently, Açai was dubbed "Amazon's Viagra" by NBC's Matt Lauer.²⁵

Many Brazilians believe it gives men increased sexual strength and energy. Studies are looking into the claims of this amazing fruit as a sexual energizer, but one man recounted that when he was having difficulty in fathering a child, the first thing his doctor recommended was "Drink lots of Açai," and the man said, "It worked!"²⁶

Do You Want Fruit or Juice?

What's the best way to have your Açai – as a fruit or as a juice?

If you don't live in Brazil, it's unlikely you'll get the chance to taste the actual fruit right from the tree. Because the Açai berry is very fragile, shipping it long distances is not advisable. So manufacturers experimented with

the best way to preserve its high level of nutrients. They came up with a freeze-dry method that maintains most of the integrity of the original fruit.

This freeze-dried product can be added to a number of different foods, or made into smoothies, sorbets, or ice cream. And you can always drink your Açaí. There are a number of companies that make pure Açaí juice. I'd advise against consuming Acai "juice drinks" that include other fruit juices and added flavorings.

If you want to ingest large amounts of Açaí, drinking the juice is the most efficient way, because your body absorbs liquids faster, and sometimes better, than it does solids. Liquids are able to enter your blood stream more quickly because they don't need to be broken down by your body. And since the juice is made from the pulp and seeds of the fruit, it can still provide you with a complete spectrum of nutrients.²⁷

Perhaps you're concerned about whether you'll like the taste of Açaí. University of Florida researcher Dr. Susanne Talcott said,

"...the flavor is described as a mixture of red wine and chocolate, so what more would you want from a fruit?"²⁸

Others familiar with its taste say it is a perfect blend, being neither too tart nor too sweet.

Scientists are now convinced that Açaí has extraordinary health benefits, and many are planning even more research into the secrets of this tiny yet amazing new fruit.

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² Açaí Night Moisturizer, ingredients, <http://www.mercolahealthyskin.com/organic-acai-night-moisturizer.aspx> (Accessed November 22, 2008)

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⁶ Açaí Berries Top the Antioxidant Rankings, Says Study, <http://www.nutraingredients.com/Research/Acai-berries-top-the-antioxidant-rankings-says-study> (Accessed November 20, 2008).

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