

# Dried Plums

Information compiled by the California Dried Plum Board

**How Produced** – A tree starts to bear fruit four to six years after planting and reaches its full production capacity (150 to 300 pounds of raw fruit per year) sometime between its eighth and twelfth year in the ground. The tree will continue to bear quality fruit on a commercial basis for about 30 years.

By mid-August, the orchards are ready for harvesting, which generally takes about 30 days. Harvest time is determined by fruit ripeness, since plums are one of the few fruits allowed to fully ripen before they are picked.

Today, the majority of California's dried plums are machine harvested. The fruit is shaken off the tree and transferred via conveyor belt into bins which then go to the dehydrator. The orchard ripe fruit is washed, placed on wooden trays and dehydrated—three pounds of fresh fruit then become one pound of dried plums.

From the dehydrator, the dried plums go to packing plants where they are graded for size, inspected and stored to await final processing and packaging. Unlike the majority of processed fruits, most dried plums are packed to order. With each order, plums are re-hydrated, sterilized, put through a final inspection and packaged for shipping.

**History** – Louis Pellier, a Frenchman, introduced dried plums to the United States in 1856 after an unsuccessful gold mining venture in California. He established an orchard in Santa Clara Valley which became a great success. As the seasons turned, Pellier's patient work began to bear fruit, and the California dried plum industry was born. The development of the transcontinental railroad in 1869 increased the market for dried plums across the nation.

In 1905, California dried plum grower Martin Seely tried to remedy a labor shortage by bringing 500 monkeys to the Santa Clara Valley from Panama to pick dried plums. Seely organized them into crews of 50 (with a human supervisor overseeing each crew) and set them to work in the fields. While the monkeys were reliable at picking the fruit, they also ate every plum they picked.

In 1941, America's involvement in World War II provoked the heaviest buying of dried fruit in history. However, the war

years were challenging for farmers—farm labor shortages, limited inventories of supplies and farm equipment, and rising costs all took their toll.



**Varieties** – Not all plum varieties can be dried. The high sugar content of the California variety allows it to be dried without fermentation occurring around the pit. The California variety is an off shoot of La Petite d'Agen, a plum native of Southwest France. Today's California dried plum accounts for 99 percent of the United States dried plum production because it has ideal characteristics for drying.

**Commodity Value** – California supplies more than 50 percent of the world's supply of dried plums from over 60,000 bearing acres. Approximately 65,000 tons of dried plums are exported annually to more than 60 different countries. In 2008, California produced 130,000 tons of dried plums, valued at \$196 million.

**Top Producing Counties** – Most dried plums are grown in the Sacramento and San Joaquin valleys where the rich soil and the long, warm and clear growing season provides ideal growing conditions. The leading counties are Sutter, Butte, Yuba, Tehama, Glenn and Tulare.

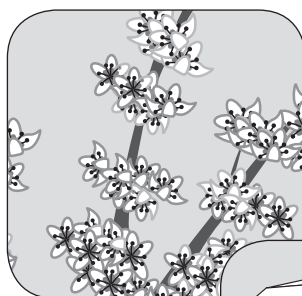
**Nutritional Value** – California dried plums are a high-energy snack that provides antioxidants, potassium and fiber. These nutrients may help reduce the risk of some chronic diseases. Dried plums have a unique combination of high levels of pectin, sorbitol and malic acid which makes dried plum puree an ideal fat substitute in baking. The antioxidants in dried plums eliminate the "warmed-over" flavor in precooked meats, and fiber and sorbitol help retain moisture in leaner cuts of red meat and poultry.

**For additional information:**

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# Dried Plum Activity Sheet



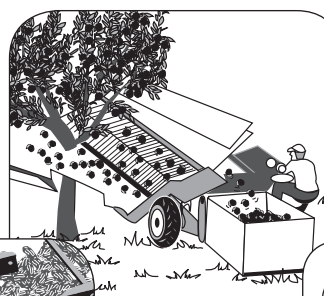
← #1

In early spring, bees pollinate the white, fragrant blossoms and plum development begins.



← #2

The orchards are irrigated and nutrients are added to the soil. As the plums ripen they turn from green to purple.

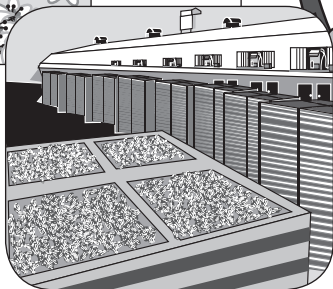


← #3

Mechanical harvesters grab the trunks and shake off the fruit which fall onto fabric catching frames and are then transported by conveyor belt into bins.

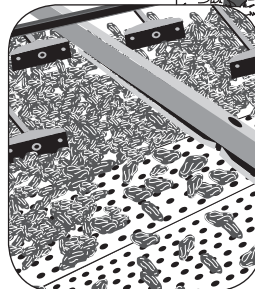
#4 ➤

After weighing and washing, the plums are stacked onto trays and rolled into large tunnels where they are dehydrated.



#5 ➤

During processing the dried plums are sorted, steamed, pitted and packaged.



#6 ➤

Consumers enjoy healthful dried plums as bite-sized snacks and juice or as an ingredient in baked goods, cereals and energy bars.



## Lesson Ideas

- Keep a daily journal tracking the food you eat throughout the week. Compare your daily servings of fruits and vegetables to those recommended by USDA's MyPyramid. Set an attainable goal to increase your fruit and vegetable consumption.
- Use MyPyramid to investigate the nutritional value of fresh vs. dried fruits. Determine if there is enough fruit in your daily diet.
- Create short myths explaining how dried plums get their wrinkles.
- Devise an advertisement which promotes the eating of dried plums.
- Create an advertising jingle promoting dried plums.
- Find out how dried plums are associated with the Gold Rush of the 1800s.
- Research the science of dehydration and learn its benefits as a food preservation method.
- Invite a dried plum producer or grower into your classroom to discuss his or her profession.

## Fantastic Facts

1. How are dried plums harvested?
2. In what California valley was the first dried plum orchard established?
3. What animal did a dried plum grower try to use as a picker in his orchards during a labor shortage in 1905?
4. True or false? Dried plums are fully ripened on the trees before harvest.
5. What characteristic allows d'Agen plums to dry without fermenting around the pit?
6. How many pounds of fresh fruit make one pound of dried plums?
7. True or false? Water is added to dehydrated dried plums right before they are packed for consumers.
8. For about how many years are commercial plum trees productive?

1) By mechanical shakers 2) Santa Clara 3) Monkey 4) True 5) High sugar content 6) Three pounds 7) True 8) 30 years

## Lesson Plan: A Low-Fat Cookbook

**Introduction:** Over the last decade, people have realized the health benefits of having a low fat diet that includes a minimum of five servings of fruits and vegetables each day. In this activity, the students will analyze some of their favorite recipes and see how they can make their favorite dessert a healthier snack.

**Materials:** 1½ cups (8 ounces) pitted dried plums, water, blender, one packaged brownie mix with required ingredients, one favorite baked snack recipe from each student, blank paper, markers, construction paper.

### Procedure:

1. Make a puree by pureeing 1½ cups of pitted dried plums and six tablespoons of hot water in a food processor or blender. This makes one cup of dried plum puree. Use one half the

butter or oil called for in the recipe. Replace the amount of butter eliminated with one-half measure of dried plum puree. If a recipe calls for 1 cup butter, use ½ cup butter and ¼ cup dried plum puree.

2. Have the students taste the brownies and comment on their flavor. Explain what you did to make them lower in fat.
3. Have the students bring in one or two of their favorite brownie, cake or cookie recipes and rewrite the recipe using dried plum puree (see step 1). Encourage the students to try their new recipes at home. Works best with dark colored baked goods.
4. Create a class cookbook of the low-fat recipes. It may include a recipe from each child with illustrations, quotes from students and parents who tried their new recipes, as well as scientific statistics on the need for a healthy diet.

