

# Sacred Animals and Exotic Tropical Plants

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PHOTO: SOFIA MONZÓN



## ZAPOTE

*The popular name represents many diverse edible fruits of Guatemala*

One of the tree fruits raised by the Maya long ago that is still enjoyed today is the zapote. Although there are several fruits of the same name, the popular nomenclature is pure chaos. Some of the “zapote” fruits belong to the sapotaceae family and all are native to Mesoamerica. But other botanically unrelated fruits are also called zapote/sapote; some are barely edible (such as the zapotón). There are probably even other zapote-named fruits that are not all native to Mesoamerica.

Most zapotes have a soft fruit inside and a “zapote brown” covering outside (except for a few that have other external colors). It is typical for Spanish nomenclature of fruits and flowers to be totally confusing. Zapote is a vestige of the Nahuatl (Aztec) word *tzapotl*.

The first plant on our list, *Manilkara zapote*, is commonly named chicozapote. This is one of the most appreciated edible species because of its commercial value. It is distributed from the southeast of Mexico, especially the Yucatán Peninsula into Belize

  
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and the Petén area, where it is occasionally an abundant tree in the forest. The principal products of these trees are the fruit; the latex, which is used as the basis of natural chewing gum; and the wood, which is used for construction. Another important attribute is its medicinal properties, said to alleviate dysentery and diarrhea.

You can see several types of zapote fruit trees at Frutas del Mundo, a remarkable orchard of diversity organized by Dwight Carter. You can visit Frutas del Mundo in nearby villages by contacting Kevin Lock, a popular guide in the Río Dulce area.

One of FLAAR's principal interests is nutrition in Guatemala. This is why we are

now collecting pertinent information related to the eating habits of Maya people, and all the plants they used and how they used them for food. We do not intend to commercialize these plants ourselves. FLAAR Mesoamerica, just like other NGOs and government programs, is aware of the nutritional problem Guatemala faces and our intention is to help by teaching people which plants to reintroduce into their house-side gardens and which fruits to provide to their children.

*To familiarize yourself with images of the different zapote fruits, you can also peruse the full-color photographic essays on various tropical Maya fruits and vegetables and nuts on our [www.maya-ethnobotany.org](http://www.maya-ethnobotany.org).*



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The four species that belong to the Sapotaceae family and are named zapote are:

1. **Chico zapote**, *Manilkara zapota*
2. **Yellow zapote**, *canistel*, *Pouteria campechiana*
3. **Mamey sapote**, *Pouteria sapota*
4. **Green sapote**, *Pouteria viridis*

Other “zapote” fruits include:

- **White sapote**, *Casimiroa edulis*, of the Rutaceae family.
- **Red zapote**, *Mammea Americana*, zapote mamey
- **Monkey apple**, *Licania platypus*, **sansapote**, **sonzapote**,

A website on tourism of Costa Rica gives the most unexpected zapote name:

- **Chichihualtzapotl**, the Nahuatl (Aztec) name for “zapote nodriza” or “mothering zapote,” which is papaya! 🍌

*Dr. Nicholas M. Hellmuth is director of FLAAR Reports (Foundation for Latin American Anthropological Research). The full list of all Mayan ethnobotanicals is available at [www.maya-ethnobotany.org](http://www.maya-ethnobotany.org). If you find any of the plants we have not yet located, please contact us at [FrontDesk@FLAAR.org](mailto:FrontDesk@FLAAR.org)*