

The Açaí Berry – A Secret From the Amazon

By Ryan Harrison, MA

Ryan N. Harrison, MA is a Holistic Health Educator/Consultant in private practice (<http://www.BeWholeBeWell.com>). He has taught holistic nutrition, therapeutic herbalism and natural health for many years in both online and traditional settings.

Not long ago, natives of the Amazon were the only people who knew and regularly enjoyed the many health benefits of a small, dark, and exotic berry. In time, this berry – the açaí [pronounced “ah-sigh-EE”] – found itself the focus of many research studies. The result? Açaí has become something of a superfood superstar, boasting a nutrient-dense profile packed with phytonutrients, fiber, amino acids, and more.

In today’s world, rife with toxins in the air, earth, and water, the name of the game is avoiding inflammation and undue stress on the body and its systems. These problems are often the result of the introduction of toxins into the body, a problem that is far more widespread than most people realize.

Scientists have known for years that we are at a point in human history in which we are simply unable to live a toxin-free life. In fact, a recent study conducted by the Environmental Working Group found 287 chemicals in the blood of only 10 Americans...all of whom were newborns! If even babies come into the world bearing such a toxic burden in their bodies, it should be obvious that all of us alive today are in a similar – if not worse – situation.

And what’s the result of living in bodies that are beset by illness-inducing chemicals and toxins? There is a long list of possibilities including cancer, hormonal imbalances, immune system dysfunction, heart disease, Alzheimer’s and other brain disorders, asthma, diabetes, arthritis, eczema, and many more.

If you’re reading this article, chances are you know enough about wellness to know that what you eat plays an enormous part in your overall health. In recent years, studies have confirmed – and continue to do so – that a diet rich in fiber, vitamins, minerals, other nutrients and phytochemicals can improve and enrich a person’s life, largely by helping the body detoxify and heal damage done by the various pollutants with which we come into contact.

Enter açaí.

This little berry packs quite a powerful punch. It boasts one of the highest – if not *the* highest – ORAC rating known in connection with other antioxidant-rich foods. ORAC (Oxygen Radical Absorbance Capacity) scores are used to express a food’s antioxidant power. When properly prepared, açaí berries rank with an ORAC score many times higher than other well-known “good for you” foods such as blueberries, oranges, broccoli and tomatoes. And the higher the ORAC value, the more potent the food is as a defense against damaging free radicals, infamous for their part in causing inflammation all throughout the body from head to toe.

Açaí is naturally low in fat, sodium and calories, but is teeming with other health-promoting nutrients. Indeed, the açaí berry has been called the most nutritious berry on earth. When

properly grown, harvested, and prepared, it contains nineteen essential and non-essential amino acids – the building blocks of protein.

It's also the leading source of anthocyanins, powerful antioxidants that help reduce heart disease and high cholesterol. You may have heard that drinking a glass of red wine each day is “healthy” because of its potential beneficial effects on the heart and blood vessels. Açai certainly surpasses wine in this respect, having up to thirty times the anthocyanins in red wine.

One problem with berries tends to be that they are so high in natural sugar. For people who need to watch their glycemic load, this can be a bother. How can they get the nutrients found naturally in berries without throwing their blood sugar out of healthy bounds? Fortunately, açai is low on the glycemic index, due to its high concentration of fiber. Not only does this help moderate how much of its natural sugar makes it into the bloodstream, it also can help normalize blood sugar levels and therefore reduce risk of diabetes.

But the berry's goodness doesn't stop there! Açai is naturally packed with vitamins and minerals including vitamins A, B1, B2, B3, C and E; and the minerals calcium, chromium, potassium, iron, phosphorus, magnesium, copper, and zinc. Together, these essential micronutrients give the immune system a boost, improve cellular function, help reduce inflammation, increase energy production, and make many processes of the body run more smoothly.

Additionally, açai berries contain a host of phytonutrients – active, health-protective compounds found naturally in plants. Some of these, called phytosterols, help lower cholesterol and high blood pressure and combat cancer. Others, known as polyphenolic flavonoids, are known to have anti-tumor properties, guarding against certain cancers. They are also anti-inflammatory and anti-allergenic in nature.

Probably the only thing that açai has going against it is that it doesn't grow in your backyard! Fortunately, several companies have answered the challenge to help make these precious little berries available to the general public. In the process, the strong interest in these Amazon-grown fruits actually helps protect the endangered forest and, as locals are employed to harvest the berries, the local economy is stimulated, as well.

Not all açai berry products are equal, however. The best will actually have been freeze-dried. While this may seem like an unnecessary or less-than-optimal step, in reality açai fruit deteriorates very quickly after harvest; freeze-drying the berries immediately after they are picked ensures that a minimum of nutrients are lost.

In addition, it's good to remember that – just like most nutrients – açai's active constituents work best in tandem with other superfoods. So, look for a product that contains a blend of fruits and berries in addition to açai. That way, you're guaranteed a product that will energize, revitalize and revolutionize your health and wellbeing.

Sidebar suggestion:

10 Reasons to Try Açaí

Still not convinced? Or do you need a quick list of reasons to help you explain to your family and friends why they should try açaí, too? Check out these facts:

1. It protects cells from pathogens, antigens and carcinogens.
2. It has one of the strongest antioxidant ratings of all studied fruits and vegetables.
3. It actually restores antioxidants that get “used up” by battling free radicals in the body.
4. It helps reduce risk of cancer by neutralizing free radical damage to DNA, a vital step in the formation of cancer and tumor cells.
5. It relieves inflammation due to its essential fatty acid and anti-inflammatory components.
6. It combats the effects of diabetes, helping the body regulate blood sugar and strengthen the pancreas.
7. It strengthens the heart and blood vessel walls, helping to prevent edema, strokes, and heart failure.
8. It helps with digestion, as it comes with its own enzymes, improving nutrient availability and transport throughout the body.
9. It helps protect memory by actively and aggressively combating free radicals.
10. It helps save the endangered rain forests of Brazil and helps stimulate the economy of its indigenous people.

(From “26 Reasons to Drink Açaí Berry Complex” by SoundConcepts of Health and Wealth, Inc.)