

# Changing names: tamarillo and kiwifruit

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The importance of companies choosing suitable names for both themselves and their products is often emphasised, with lists of suitable criteria being published. The marketing names of several fruits produced in New Zealand have been changed during the past 50-60 years. The horned African cucumber became the kiwano, the New Zealand grapefruit (or poorman / poor man's orange) the goldfruit, the tree tomato the tamarillo and the Chinese gooseberry the kiwifruit. The best documented of these cases are the tamarillo and the kiwifruit. Their names were changed initially for the export markets. What were the reasons for the changes, how were the new names chosen and what were the consequences?

## Tamarillo

The botanical name for the tamarillo (Fig. 1) is *Solanum betaceum* Cav. (syn. *Cyphomandra betacea* (Cav.) Sendtn.). It is widespread in South America, where northern Peru and southern Ecuador are considered to be the centre of domestication (Viera et al., 2019). It is widely grown in home gardens and orchards in South America, with more than 11,000 ha of commercial orchards in Colombia, Ecuador and Peru. In South America the most widely used name is tomate de árbol, which translates into English as tree tomato, the generally used common name.

The tree tomato appears to have been introduced into New Zealand in 1891 by David Hay & Sons, nurserymen of Auckland (Farmer, 1974). Plants were advertised in their 1891/1892 catalogue at 2/6 (25 cents) each. Hay's seedlings had been raised from seed sent from the "hill districts" of India, where the plants had probably originally come from the then Jamaica Botanical Garden.

In Jamaica it was known as "tree tomato" or, sometimes, as "vegetable mercury" because of its supposed beneficial effects on the liver. In New Zealand it also became known for many years under the name "tree tomato". It was a popular home garden plant, with commercial growing on a small scale and marketing beginning before 1920. Production peaked in the mid-1960s, later declining partly because of disease problems, and in 2018 there were only about 100 ha of commercial orchards left in New Zealand producing about 450 tonnes of fruit annually, and mainly consumed locally (Aitken and Warrington, 2019).



Fig. 1 Tamarillos, *Solanum betaceum*, a red-skinned form developed in New Zealand. Photo: ©Plant & Food Research.

The tree tomato and the tomato are now usually placed together in the genus *Solanum* but their culinary uses are different. In the 1960s New Zealand growers were aware of the confusion between the names "tomato" and "tree tomato", especially amongst overseas consumers and it was thought that this could be hindering the expansion of export markets. A new name was considered desirable and the requirements suggested were:

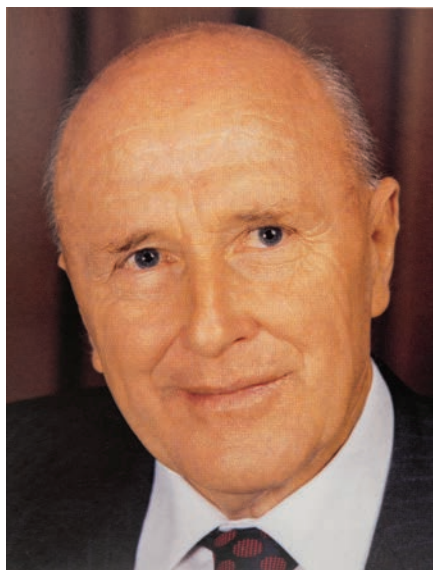
"The name must have an exotic, subtropical character.  
It must appeal to the eye.  
It must be musical to the ear.  
It must be easy to pronounce and spell in any country."  
(Anon., 1966a).

According to Bill Thompson (Anon., 1966a), of the then Tree Tomato Advertising and Promotion Committee, there seemed to be no suitable name in South America. However, the related "tomatillo" (*Physalis philadelphica* Lam. and *Physalis ixocarpa* Brot. ex Hornem.), originally cultivated in Mexico, had the right sound so "tillo" was taken as the last part of a name. It was thought that part of the new name should ideally be of Māori origin and "Tama" was chosen as Tama-te-kapua was commander of the Te Arawa canoe and therefore of great historical significance. "Tamatillo" did not, however, sound quite right and the second "t" was replaced by "r" resulting in "tamarillo", a name seemingly combining the South American origin with the country of adoption, New Zealand.

The new name officially came into effect after 31 January 1967, after tree tomato growers voted in 1966 overwhelmingly in favour (145:13) (Anon., 1966b). J.P. (Jack) Turner (Fig. 2) of the produce auctioneering firm Turners & Growers Ltd (now T&G Global Ltd) presciently noted at the launch of the new name "... the changing of the name to tamarillo should not be considered the final answer. The future of the tamarillo will depend on its ability to hold its own in competition with other fruits and to appeal to an ever-widening circle of consumers who want fruit which is attractive in appearance, pleasant in taste and reasonable in price" (Anon., 1967).

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Sadly, the change of name to tamarillo was not the final answer. The new name sounded “subtropical” or “exotic”, it was euphonious, indeed “musical”, but this was not enough to compensate for production and marketing problems. Fruit production, compared with that in South America, has remained small and exports from New Zealand are of limited value. Bill Thompson’s devised name “tamarillo”, although certainly attractive, has remained essentially of New Zealand significance. Most of the rest of the English-speaking world, with a few exceptions, still uses “tree tomato”.



**Fig. 2** J.P. (Jack) Turner of Turners & Growers Ltd. Photograph courtesy of T&G Global Ltd.

### Kiwifruit

Jack Turner certainly knew the importance of marketing names. A few years earlier, in 1959, he had devised the name “kiwifruit”. The fate of this name is very different. The name does not necessarily indicate a subtropical origin, it is certainly not musical, but just as the crop expanded to become of international importance so too has the new name become the standard, accepted name throughout the world.

Commercial kiwifruit are large-fruited selections of *Actinidia chinensis* Planch. (Fig. 3). The genus *Actinidia* comes mainly from China, with a few species from neighbouring countries. In China the most widely used name is mihoutao or monkey peach – “... its shape is that of the pear, its colour that of the peach and monkeys like to eat it, hence its name” from Li Shizhen’s *Bencao Gangmu* (*Pentsao Kangmu*) (1590). (For references see Ferguson, 1990.) Another widely used name,

especially in the Yangtze Valley, was yangtao (sun peach) and this was used by some early European writers. Otherwise they adopted names such as “Wilson’s gooseberry” (after the plant explorer E.H. Wilson; Fig. 4), “gooseberry vine” or “Ichang gooseberry”. Wilson had introduced the fruit to the foreign residents of Ichang in 1900 (Wilson, 1913). The fruit had green flesh – they were of *Actinidia chinensis* var. *deliciosa* (A.Chev.) A.Chev., and it was this variety with fruit that had hairy skins and green flesh that was to be domesticated and grown commercially over the next one hundred years.



**Fig. 3** ‘Hayward’ kiwifruit (*Actinidia chinensis* var. *deliciosa*) on vine. Photo: ©Plant & Food Research.



**Fig. 4** E.H. Wilson who described the fruit of *Actinidia chinensis* as having “the flavour of ripe gooseberries”. Photograph at the time of his first trip to China. Photograph from *The Gardeners’ Chronicle 3rd Series*, 37 (1905): 114.

It seems to have been Wilson who was the first to emphasise the flavour of the ripe fruit being reminiscent of that of the European gooseberry (*Ribes uva-crispa* L., syn. *Ribes grossularia* L.). Thus, the catalogue advertising the first *A. chinensis* plants available in Europe, seed having been collected in China by Wilson, said “... edible fruits having the size of walnuts, and the flavour of ripe gooseberries” (Veitch & Sons, 1904). A few years later, Wilson was quoted as saying “Flesh green, of most excellent flavor, to my palate akin to that of the common gooseberry but tempered with a flavor peculiarly its own” (USDA Bureau of Plant Industry, 1909). This seems to be the basis for the name “Chinese gooseberry”. An alternative, but not very convincing, suggestion is that the name came “... from the gooseberry-like interior of the fruits” (J.M. Poynton quoted in Anon., 1923).

The first use of the combination “Chinese gooseberry” is not certain. Frank Mason, a nurseryman of Feilding, was using “Chinese gooseberry” in his cash books in 1917 and the name was appearing regularly in New Zealand newspapers and journals from 1921 onwards (Ferguson and Bollard, 1990). Chinese gooseberry became the standard name for many years in New Zealand and the first exports to Australia and the United Kingdom were sold under that name.

Myths have accumulated around the reasons for the change in name from “Chinese gooseberry” to “kiwifruit”.

**Myth 1: The name was changed because of American suspicions of things Chinese.** Turners & Growers Ltd attempted exporting in 1959 to the United States using the name Chinese gooseberry. This name was considered unsuitable by the importers. Some authors (e.g., Dyson, 1980) have suggested that it was because of the ingrained American suspicion at the time of things Chinese, that it was primarily the “Chinese” part of the name that was unsuitable. This myth is repeated by the New Zealand Ministry of Culture and Heritage (2016): “New Zealand began exporting the fruit to the US in the 1950s. This was the height of the Cold War and the term Chinese gooseberry was a marketing nightmare for Turners and Growers.”

This is simply not true: discussions with Jack Turner, correspondence that he made available to me and published summaries (Anon., 1982; Ferguson and Bollard, 1990; Stead, 1997; Truttman, 2010) all indicate that it was the “gooseberry” part of the name that was the problem. Indeed, Jack Turner has been explicit “It was nothing to do with anti-Chinese feeling.” (J.P. Turner quoted in Thompson, 1987). “... it wasn’t the Chinese part they [the American authorities] didn’t like, it was the name gooseberry ...” (J.P. Turner in Stead, 1997). There were, nevertheless, restrictions on the import to the United States of goods from China.

What was the problem with “gooseberry”? Any association with the European gooseberry was considered undesirable, the name suggesting that the fruit were produced close to the ground and could be contaminated by soil. Such fruit would probably be excluded by the USDA quarantine officers as they were very worried about the possibility of contamination by anthrax. An alternative name would be an advantage to avoid unnecessarily concerning the quarantine officers.

This was spelt out in a note published in 1974 (Anon., 1974). “The name was changed in order to ensure entry of the fruit into the U.S.A., where quarantine regulations rigidly excluded fruit grown on or near the ground, such as gooseberries. It was only after strong representations were made, with proof that the fruit was grown on a vine, that the firm concerned [Turners & Growers Ltd], one of our members, was able to obtain entry into the U.S.A. and this was indeed facilitated by the use of the name Kiwifruit.”

**Myth 2: Frieda Caplan devised the name kiwifruit** (e.g., Ward and Courtney, 2013). Frieda Caplan’s various accounts of her early experiences with the kiwifruit are not consistent. Recent obituaries quote her as saying “Why don’t you call ‘em kiwi fruit? Because kiwis are the national bird of New Zealand, and they looked just like a kiwi bird.” (CBS News, 2020). However, according to an earlier report (Caplan quoted in Anon., 1980?): “In 1961 the Los Angeles buyer of a big chain

came to me saying a customer was asking for something called Kiwi fruit. Had we ever heard of it? It took us 18 months to find out [what] it was and that it [came] from New Zealand.” The conclusion must be that she could not have devised the name.

Other accounts also indicate that it was only when she first handled kiwifruit that she used the name as suggested to her by a colleague in the supply chain (Langer, 2020). It seems that she first marketed kiwifruit in 1962, by which time the new name had already been devised. There is no doubt that Frieda Caplan did much to popularise kiwifruit in California (Fig. 5), but the correspondence held in the archives of Turners & Growers Ltd likewise does not indicate any role for her in devising the new name “kiwifruit”.



**Fig. 5** Exports of kiwifruit to the United States. From left to right: Grahame Turner of Turners & Growers, Frieda Caplan of Produce Specialties Inc, Bill Bennett of C.H. Robinson, produce importers, Norman Sondag of Ziel & Co Inc. Photograph mid-1960s, courtesy of T&G Global Ltd.

The credit for the name kiwifruit rightly goes to Turners & Growers Ltd (Anon., 1982; Earp, 1988; Ferguson and Bollard, 1990; Stead, 1997; Truttman, 2010). “Gooseberry” was definitely undesirable and “Chinese” might possibly cause problems. Sir Harvey Turner suggested the name “melonette” because the fruit when cut in half resembled a melon. Fruit were briefly exported under that name to the United States, However, Norman Sondag of Ziel & Co, Inc of San Francisco disliked this name and any use of the word “berry” for good commercial reasons: both berries and melons were subject to high rates

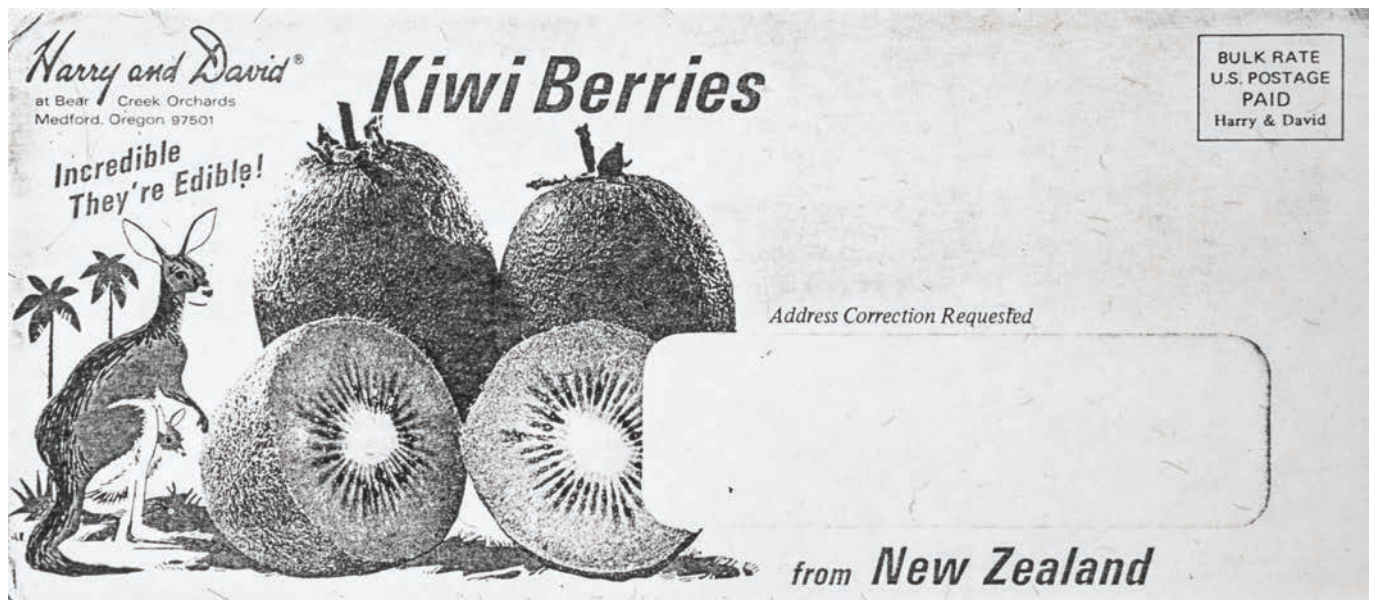
of customs duties for half the year, the period when the fruit would be available from New Zealand.

He suggested a short Māori name should be chosen. In June of 1959, a meeting including Sir Harvey Turner, Jack Turner and Grahame Turner, adopted the name kiwifruit at the suggestion of Jack Turner (J. Turner writing in Stead, 1997). “My father [Sir Harvey Turner, then Chairman of Turners & Growers Ltd] certainly finalised it” (J. Turner quoted in Thompson, 1987).

**Myth 3: The name kiwifruit was chosen because of a similarity between the kiwi, the bird, and the fruit.** This myth probably originates from some of the comments of Frieda Caplan quoted above. It was given credence by the California Kiwifruit Commission (2009): “Fast-forward to 1962, when a California produce dealer began importing New Zealand gooseberries to satisfy the request of a lone Safeway shopper. The dealer renamed the product ‘kiwifruit’ because of its resemblance to the fuzzy brown kiwi – New Zealand’s funny-looking national bird”.

Any such rather far-fetched similarity was certainly not in the minds of those who devised the name. Grahame Turner in a letter to Norman Sondag, quoted in Stead (1997), wrote “We have finally settled on the name ‘kiwifruit’ to be used in the same manner as the name is used for the common ‘passionfruit.’ We imagine that most people, especially in your part of the world, will know that the kiwi is our national emblem and we hope that the name will fit the bill.” Jack Turner was also aware that because of the close association in the Pacific during World War II many Americans knew that New Zealand servicemen were known as “kiwis” (J.P. Turner, pers. comm.).

The first time the name kiwifruit appeared in print was in a brochure of the Ziel & Co, Inc in September 1959 (Truttman, 2010). The new name was soon widely used in California, particularly because of the marketing zeal of Frieda Caplan. When Californian orchardists started producing kiwifruit, with her encouragement they used the new name (Fletcher, 1969). Variants of the name were also used.



**Fig. 6** Envelope enclosing advertisement by Harry and David® for “kiwi berries” (kiwifruit) as “Fruit of the Month” for July 1964. The designer seems uncertain as to where exactly New Zealand is and the phrase “Incredible: they’re edible” does not really inspire confidence.

The American firm of Harry & David® started using kiwifruit as their “Fruit of the Month” for July in 1964, under the name “kiwi berries” – “they’re scarcer than trout’s fur, hen’s teeth, screen doors on submarines”. A pity about the kangaroo pictured in the advertisements (Fig. 6). These fruit were supplied by Stan Conway of the New Zealand Fruitgrowers Federation, who did not want, out of commercial fairness, to use the name chosen by Turners & Growers. Others too were not enthusiastic about the new name (Earp, 1988) – especially English and Australian importers – but by 1970 all exports of kiwifruit from New Zealand went under that name (Fletcher, 1970).

Acceptance of the new name in export markets was greatly assisted by the efforts of the New Zealand Kiwifruit Export Promotion Committee which over 10 years from 1970 onwards spent hundreds of millions of dollars in advertising. “We established kiwifruit overseas as a name” (M. Nicol quoted in Anon., 1997). Unintentionally, their advertising may have reinforced the myth of similarity between the kiwi, the bird, and the kiwifruit. For example, one of their booklets of 1979 had on its cover a rather bewildered kiwi looking quizzically at a kiwifruit as if it were a freshly laid egg (Fig. 7).



**Fig. 7** “Kiwifruit. A strange New Zealand phenomenon.” Cover of an advertising booklet by the New Zealand Kiwifruit Export Promotion Committee, 1979.

Initially, the name kiwifruit was used only in the export markets. For example, the caption for a photograph published in *Fruit and Produce* in October 1966 (Anon., 1966c) reads: “Chinese gooseberries from New Zealand being unloaded from an Air New Zealand DC-8 at Los Angeles airport recently. Known to Americans as ‘kiwi fruit’, this unique New Zealand product ...”. It seems that it was still necessary to explain the name kiwifruit to the locals. Other countries, when they started to grow kiwifruit, adopted the new name, although there has been a regrettable tendency to reduce the name to “kiwi”.

Alternative names have largely disappeared such as “actinidia” in Italy and “souris végétale” in France (vegetable mouse, since kiwifruit on a vine resemble small hairy mice hanging by their tails).

The name kiwifruit was originally devised for good commercial reasons – so as not to attract high duties and not to unnecessarily invite the suspicions of plant quarantine officers. To overseas customers, the name was undoubtedly exotic, different. As kiwifruit became an international success so the name became accepted. It was originally devised for the hairy, green-fleshed fruit of *Actinidia chinensis* var. *deliciosa* but its use has now extended to the relatively hairless, gold-fleshed or red-fleshed fruit of *Actinidia chinensis* Planch. var. *chinensis*. The use of the name kiwifruit has become so general that fruit of other *Actinidia* species are often referred to as kiwifruit. And “kiwiberry” has become the generally accepted common name for the small, hairless fruit of *A. arguta* (Sieb. et Zucc.) Planch. ex Miq. and related hybrids of *A. arguta* with *A. melanandra* Franch. and *A. kolomikta* (Rupr. et Maxim.) Maxim.

The usage of kiwifruit is now so general that it no longer specifies a fruit from New Zealand: hence the trend towards the branding of kiwifruit, by origin or marketer (Ferguson, 2015), such as Zespri® Kiwifruit.

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