

Ishreal Thibodeaux White Mirliton Preservation Project – Phase 1

Background:



The Ishreal Thibodeaux White Mirliton is a Louisiana heirloom grown by the late Ishreal Thibodeaux in Opelousas, Louisiana.¹ It is believed to have developed from the white Puerto Rican chayote which is in itself extremely rare and thought to be the result of a recessive gene or mutation. The white chayote is not a commercially successful variety but has a similar flavor to the more common green chayote and is used in a wide variety of culinary preparations.² The Ishreal Thibodeaux White Mirliton is a less pyriform and more obovoid than the pyriform Puerto Rican white variety, but white is a dominant gene, so it is believed it was probably cross-bred with other coastal varieties.¹ In Puerto Rico the white variety is typically breaded, stuffed, or fried.²

1. Hill, Lance; "The History of Chayote (Mirliton) In North America: "One of the Noblest Gifts the Vegetable Kingdom Can Offer Man," (*Mirliton.org* March 2020), https://www.mirliton.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/The_History_of_Chayote_in_North_America.pdf

2 "White Chayote Squash," https://www.specialtyproduce.com/produce/White_Chayote_Squash_8936.php

Who Was Ishreal Thibodeaux?

Ishreal was a native of Bosco, Louisiana and was a longtime resident of Opelousas. He lived from 1926-2013 and was known to be a hardworking man. When he was in his late teens, Ishreal worked for the Opelousas Steam Laundry, then at the Opelousas Ice Plant for many years until its closure and was known to many as the *Ice Man*. He then worked for the Universal Electric Company for 15 years. After retirement he began his hobby of raising rabbits which earned him the title of the *Rabbit Man*. Ishreal was also a very avid gardener. He was successful in growing a rare white vegetable pear which was named in his honor as the "Ishreal Thibodeaux Variety" mirliton. This variety is the only pure white mirliton known to be grown in the USA. Ishreal was a dedicated husband and very loving father.³



Ishreal Thibodeaux⁴

3. "Ishreal Thibodeaux Obituary", *Legacy.com*, August 2013, <https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/dailyworld/obituary.aspx?n=ishreal-thibodeaux&pid=166667567&fhid=12388>

4. The National Archives in St. Louis, Missouri; St. Louis, Missouri; *WWII Draft Registration Cards for Louisiana, 10/16/1940 - 03/31/1947*; Record Group: *Records of the Selective Service System, 147*; Box: 559

This variety has been carried on by a number of growers since Mr. Thibodeaux's death including Chef John Folse in Baton Rouge, Ryan Paul in Lafayette, Paul D'Anna in Metairie, Louisiana, Wayne and David Hubbell in Fairhope, Alabama, and Jay Thibodeaux of Opelousas as well as many others. Despite these efforts there appears to be currently only two vines known to *Mirliton.org* to have survived the early freeze of November 2019. It is from a second planting attempt at Chef John Folse's *White Oak Estates and Gardens* in Baton Rouge and Paul D'Anna's vine in Metairie that the seed mirliton will be provided.

Purpose: To preserve and re-establish this rare heirloom that was so cherished and cared for by the late Mr. Thibodeaux and make it available to other growers willing to continue its propagation.

The Plan: Provide sprouted "seed mirliton"* or potted vines from John Folse and Paul D'Anna's respective spring crops to a group of experienced growers with a special interest in and the resources to grow chayote/mirliton. This group will follow as closely as possible a prescribed growing plan proposed by *Mirliton.org* (see *Agreement* below) as well as record requested data, provide photos or videos, and participate in bi-monthly virtual discussions. Once harvesting has begun, the growers will also agree to make available up to half their crop to interested and qualified growers who will be given the recommended growing practices from *Mirliton.org* as well as agree to be entered into the ***Ishreal Thibodeaux White Mirliton Registry*** where they can receive support from *Mirliton.org*.

Update Meetings:

Scheduled every two weeks in the first month after receiving mirliton, then monthly or as needed. An agreed upon method of meeting is yet to be decided, but with the recent increase in usage of free virtual meeting platforms (*Zoom, WebEx, etc.*) this might be a great way to share images and videos from a distance. Please let me know your preferred method of discussion, even if it is just a phone call from me and me sharing a summary of the results to the group.

The purpose of the meetings is to get updates on progress as well as support growers with information as well as sharing of "best practices".

Suggested Discussion Topics but not limited to:

1. Planting Issues

2. Growing issues
3. Soil conditions
4. Trellis or Fence Placement with respect to sun/shade
5. Watering
6. Condition of vine as it grows
7. Pesticides if needed
8. Pollination issues – Hand Pollination maybe recommended to insure fertilization
9. Challenges seen

EMERGENCY MEETINGS AS NEEDED TO SEEK ADVICE SHOULD AN ISSUE OCCUR

***- If provide a sprouted seed mirliton, it is recommended that it be planted in a 3-gallon pot for the rest of the summer and planted in the ground in early September. This will allow the development of a root system before planting in the soil. Please refer to the following resources:**

- a. <https://www.mirliton.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/A-Guide-to-Growing-Mirlitons-2010-edition-revised-2018.pdf>
- b. <https://www.mirliton.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Mirliton-Growers-guide-update-2018.pdf>
- c. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PEAB3pffKno&list=PL1VMXBrIm2LmFdCMsclUQwrReXM74ZJvU&index=19&t=0s>
- d. <https://youtu.be/1FB2EIWD0RA>
- e. <https://youtu.be/MIMpJyupXZQ>
- f. <https://youtu.be/1aPTDrTr22Q>

Ishreal Thibodeaux White Mirliton Preservation Project Agreement

This agreement establishes responsibilities of the *Mirliton.org* and the Growers to ensure the project's success insofar as possible.

Responsibilities of the Growers include:

1. Have a site that adheres to as many of the recommended conditions (see Appendix A) as possible and have a trellis for the vine.
2. Have a plastic cover and heater to protect it from frost. (see recommended plan in Appendix B).
3. Have someone who can tend the plant and record the requested data.
4. Be willing to donate half their crop to new screened growers.

Responsibilities of *Mirliton.org* include:

1. Provide 2 sprouted seed mirlitons or potted plants before Fall 2020.
2. Provide needed growing information and recommendations to the Growers in a timely manner.

Joint responsibilities include:

1. Agreement to bi-monthly virtual meetings to review status and data (see Appendix C) of the growers and exchange best practice information.
2. Provide any information needed for and review of any final reports created.

As part of this project, I will _____/will not _____ agree to provide up to 3 virtual video tour of at least two minutes of the site the vine monthly once flowering occurs until the last fruits are harvested.

Signed: _____ Grower Date: _____

Signed: _____ *Mirliton.org* Date: _____

APPENDIX A: RECOMMENDED GROWING CONDITIONS

2. *Soil* - well-drained sandy loam soil with a pH of 6.0 - 6.8.
3. *Location* - plant at a high point in your yard: water-logging the mirliton is the best way to kill it. You may have to create a raised bed or build up a high mound in your yard by adding garden soil and sand.
4. *Air Circulation* - important in suppressing airborne plant diseases.
5. *Sunlight* – while most mirlitons need at least six hours of full sun daily and can endure a full day of tropical sun; past experience has showed that the Ishreal Thibodeaux variety performs better with partial sun. Recommend morning sun with protection against the hot afternoon sun. NOTE: Avoid excessive artificial light near vine during the spring and fall since the mirliton is a “photoperiodic” plant that flowers when the length of day and night are equal (spring & fall equinox).
6. *Fertilizer* – Initially 2 tablespoons of 8-24-24 should do and follow up with 1 tsp of 8-24-24 every two months. NOTE: One common organic alternative that has been observed from successful Ishreal Thibodeaux (including the man himself) mirliton growers are rabbit droppings. Technically they appear to be great for most Louisiana heirloom varieties of mirliton. Please read more on the beneficial effects of using rabbit manure here -
https://www.canr.msu.edu/news/bunny_honey_using_rabbit_manure_as_a_fertilizer
7. *Additional Information* – These recommendations here are primarily based on the exhaustive works by Lance Hill of *Mirliton.org* that can be located through these two links:
 - a. <https://www.mirliton.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/A-Guide-to-Growing-Mirlitons-2010-edition-revised-2018.pdf>
 - b. <https://www.mirliton.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Mirliton-Growers-guide-update-2018.pdf>

APPENDIX B: FREEZE PROTECTION

The following links are related to the methods that worked well for me protecting my vine during the untimely early frost in Mobile in November 2019.

1. <https://www.mirliton.org/2019/12/06/freeze-protection-for-mirlitons-that-works/>
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XdJ3CyDf6kM&t=41s>

Some quick reference info from the Farmer's Almanac:
<https://www.almanac.com/gardening/frostdates>

Nearest Climate Station	Altitude	Last Spring Frost	First Fall Frost	Growing Season
OPELOUSAS, LA	55'	Mar 14	Nov 19	249 days
NO/METAIRE, LA	19'	Feb 09	Dec 16	309 days
BATON ROUGE, LA	65'	Mar 08	Nov 23	259 days
MOBILE REG AP, AL	219'	Mar 6	Nov 29	267 days
COLUMBIA OWENS DWTN AP, SC	213'	Mar 23	Nov 14	235 days
ASHEVILLE, NC	2237'	Apr 16	Oct 22	188 days

APPENDIX C: DATA TO COLLECT

Pre-Planting: Photo of growing area including trellis

Planting:

1. Estimate of vine growth every 7 days in feet
2. Photos of vine once a month

Flowering:

1. Photograph of female and male flowers – also note days after planting
2. Weekly photo of developing fruit -choose 2 to focus on

Harvesting:

1. Weight of first 3 mirlitons in ounces, then biggest after (voluntary)
2. Photos from top, bottom, wide side, thin side for the aforementioned mirliton with ruler in photo to show dimensions
3. Days for first picking after planting

Items that may be helpful: cameras, yard stick, measuring tape, scale in ounces; paper bag to store seed mirliton in a cool/dry/dark location.