In India, mangoes are considered both a symbol of love and the ultimate gift of friendship. How appropriate, since they're known for their singular sweetness, comforting qualities and protective nutrients.

With hundreds of kinds to choose from, finding a favorite, in theory, could be a delicious but daunting task. In fact, only four major mangoes—Tommy Atkins, Haden, Keitt and Kent—are really common. All four are similar in their exotic tastes (think peach meets pineapple) and are about the size of a large avocado, but they do have their differences.

Tommy Atkins and Haden mangoes both have what’s referred to as fibrous flesh. This means their fruit is slightly pulpy—similar to an overripe plum. Tommy Atkins mangoes have orange-red skin and a mild, sweet taste, while the Haden variety (the smallest of the four) has yellow-orange skin and is somewhat spicy. The Keitt and Kent varieties, by contrast, have non-fibrous flesh similar to that of a cantaloupe. Keitt mangoes—the largest of the four—have green skin and taste slightly lemony. Kent mangoes are rounder and have skin that’s more orange. Their flavor is richly tropical.

Beyond their tantalizing taste, mangoes supply a bounty of nutrition benefits. An average-sized mango has only about 110 calories and less than 1 gram of fat. Yet it also supplies 4 grams of fiber as well as a generous dose of vitamin A and decent amounts of C and potassium. Plus, mangoes may be a better comfort food than chocolate (sans guilt!) thanks to a stomach-soothing enzyme that helps aid digestion.

When shopping, don’t rely on a mango’s color to indicate ripeness. Instead, a ripe mango emits a fragrant aroma from the stem end. Its flesh will be slightly soft and yielding to the touch, like a perfect peach. Ripe mangoes can be stored for two to three days in a plastic bag in your refrigerator. Slightly underripe fruit can be ripened for the same amount of time in a paper bag on your counter. But hard, picked-too-soon mangoes will never ripen properly.

You can enjoy mangoes in a myriad of ways: fresh or dried; in salsas, marinades and chutneys; over chicken; and in frozen desserts and smoothies, to mention only a few. So give yourself the ultimate gift of love this summer, and make mangoes a part of your menu. You’ll be happy and healthier because you did!

—Lesley Johnson