Pacific Community
Communauté du Pacifique

Travels across the Pacific Region
BANANAS MAKE THE WORLD GO ROUND

Facts

Name: The banana, *Musa*, is not a tree but a herbaceous plant that can reach a height of 15 m.

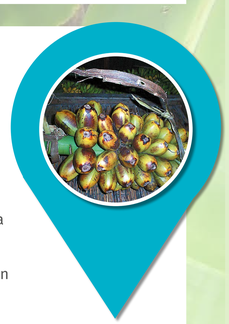
Fruit: Banana, called jaina (Fiji), fusi (Niue), fai (Samoa), siaine (Tonga), mei'a (French Polynesia), or sou (Solomon Islands)

Origin: Native to south-east Asia, the banana spread across the Pacific through successive waves of migration. It can now be found throughout the Pacific and its fruit plays an important economic role in trade across the world (import/export).

Growing conditions: Banana plants need space, sunlight, moisture, and rich, well-drained soil. You have to wait about 9 to 12 months after planting a banana plant before harvesting the fruit. A flower appears when the banana is between 6 and 7 months old. Once the fruit is ripe, the plant dies and is regenerated through suckers produced by the underground stem.

Harvest period: Bananas can be harvested all year-round: production is not linked to the seasons. A banana plant can produce up to 100 fruit per year, i.e. 10 to 20 kg of bananas.

Banana secrets



Its fruit is bursting with some little-known secrets. As for its leaves, they can be used in many different ways!

The banana:
Very rich in antioxidants, banana flesh can be used as a beauty mask for your skin or hair.

When applied to well-cleaned wounds, banana sap is an excellent healing cream.

Banana leaves:
They provide a practical, low-cost, and non-polluting solution for covering, storing and transporting food. They are also used as a roofing material, especially for temporary shelters.

In cooking, they can be used to wrap foods to be cooked in the oven and as plates or dishes for cooked food.

Interesting facts
Fe'i are a variety of bananas that stand out from the rest due to their fruit that grow upwards and their red sap, which can be used as colouring. Stories tell us that in order to frighten Captain Cook when he arrived on Niue, the islanders covered their teeth with the red sap. Thinking that the natives were cannibals, he called Niue the 'Savage Island'.

Did you know?

There are about 1000 types of banana across the world, with about 105 varieties recorded in the Pacific. Green, yellow, orange, in different shapes and sizes, bananas have very different characteristics, tastes and nutritional qualities from one fruit to another! There are sweet bananas (also called dessert bananas) and cooking bananas, which are used as a starchy vegetable. Cooking bananas were mentioned as early as the 18th century in the accounts of Pacific explorers.

Interesting facts
With some 106 million tonnes produced in the world each year, the banana is the most commonly eaten fruit in the world. It serves as a source of food security for a half a billion people.

Spotlight on the banana

Eating

Cooking bananas are used as a starchy-vegetable side-dish.

Dessert bananas are eaten as fruit. They become sweeter and easier to digest the riper they get! They can also be eaten green, but they need to be cooked first.

Storage

In the Pacific islands, bananas used to be stored in pits dug in the ground and lined with coconut fibre or banana leaves. Buried in this way before they had begun to ripen, bananas could be kept for nearly a month. Nowadays, you can find dried and frozen bananas, even bananas that have been pounded to make flour.

In Asia, banana flour is available in tinned or frozen form.

How to serve them

By definition, it is better to eat cooking bananas cooked! Cooked in a traditional oven (dug in the ground) or on hot coals, they are also delicious baked in their skins, or peeled then grated, roasted or fried.

Once dessert bananas are ripe, they can be eaten raw or cooked, blended into cakes, smoothies, milkshakes, or mousse. Mashed banana – either cooking or dessert variety – is good to give infants over the age of 6 months.

Banana flowers are also delicious! They can be picked once the bananas have reached about half their full size. To prepare the flowers, remove the hard outside layers, then cut it into thin slices and wash them to get rid of the sticky sap before adding to other recipes such as soup, fritters, etc.

Nutritional qualities

The virtues of bananas are well-known! First, they are an excellent source of energy because they are rich in carbohydrates and Vitamins B and C. The amount of vitamins varies depending on the varities. Bananas with yellow or orange flesh are richer in carotenoids and certain varieties also have Vitamin E and calcium (*Karat* in Pohnpei). As bananas are rich in potassium, they help regulate heart function.

Interesting facts
With an average glycemic index of 51, cooking bananas are a better choice for people with diabetes who need to regulate their sugar levels. In comparison, white bread has a GI of from 77 to 100.

Some examples of bananas found in the Pacific:

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