

Banana

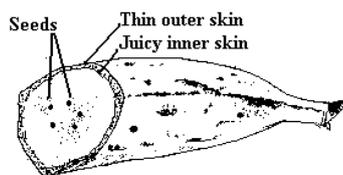
The humble banana almost seems like a miracle of nature. Sweet and creamy, it is a favorite food for everyone from infants to elders. We all appreciate this fruit, its soft and nourishing flesh, its snack-sized portions, and its easy-peel covering, all 'prepackaged' by Mother Nature. Indeed, the banana appears purpose-designed for efficient human consumption.

The plant is very important in many regions of the tropics, where different parts of it are used and the fruit itself is an essential dietary staple. There are well over 500 varieties. The most common one is Cavendish; other types include Williams, Apple and a small red banana called the Red Jamaica.

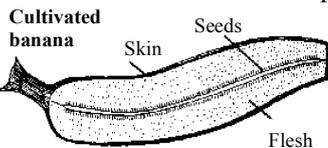
Plantain, a large type, starchy and low in sugar, is mostly used as a vegetable in cooking, very popular in Western Africa and the Caribbean countries. The plant's origin is placed in the jungles of Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines, where many varieties of wild bananas still grow today. West Africans are credited to have given the name, as the word 'banana' derives ultimately from Arabic *banan* 'finger', an origin which would be echoed in the English term 'hand' for a bunch of bananas, and serves as a reminder that many early varieties of banana are quite small.

Botanically, the fruit is classified as a berry, growing on what is casually described as a tree but is in fact a giant suckering perennial herb. What appears to be the trunk is actually a 'pseudo stem' made up of overlapping bases of leaves, arising from a rhizome or corm. The leaves unfurl as the plant grows, extend upward and outward. The inflorescence is a terminal spike shooting out from the heart in the tip of the stem. At first, it is a large, oval, purple-clad bud. As it opens, it is seen that the slim, tubular, toothed, white flowers are clustered in whorled double rows along the floral stalk; each cluster is covered by a thick, waxy, hood-like bract, purple outside and deep red within.

Wild banana



Female flowers occupy the lower 5 to 12 rows; above them may be some rows of hermaphrodite flowers; male flowers are borne in the upper



rows. The inflorescence very rarely remains upright; generally it starts to bend downward. Eventually, the male flowers and their bracts are shed, leaving most of the upper stalk naked except at the very tip where there usually remains an unopened bud containing the

last-formed of the male flowers. The young fruits, looking like slender green fingers, develop in clusters from the female flowers, when fully-grown, each cluster is known as a 'hand' of bananas. In the middle of the cultivated fruit you can see little black specks, they are the seeds, diminished nearly to non-existence while in the wild fruit, the seeds are quite visible. Suckers spring up around the main plant forming a clump or 'stool', the eldest sucker replacing the main plant when the latter fruits and dies; this process can keep on going for many years.

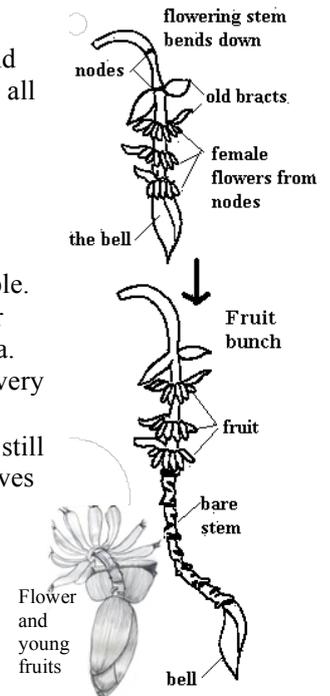
Banana is one of the world's most popular fruit, it is consumed raw, cooked, whole, sliced or mashed. While we are accustomed to thinking of bananas as having yellow skins, they can also feature red, pink, purple and black tones. The plant is used for more than just its fruits. Its flowers, leaves and trunk (pseudo stem) are important in the cuisine of many Asian and Pacific countries. The stem and the flower are usually cooked as a vegetable in a stew or a curry-type dish, or sliced and used in salad. To prepare the flower for cooking, start by removing the hard, dry outer bracts until you get to the soft tender cream-colored edible ones. Beneath each bract you remove, you will notice a row of slender, delicate flowers; those too are edible when young. Boil or steam the whole blossom until soft before cutting or slicing it. Keep the large outer bracts and use them as decorative food 'plates' for salad or side dishes.

Banana leaf is a material of great use; in Asian and Pacific countries, many foodstuffs bought in the market are wrapped in banana leaves to take home, raw foods are often wrapped in banana leaves to be steamed - this enhances the flavour of the food. Banana leaves also make handy dinner plates, tablemats and containers for lunch and other snack food.

In industry, the plant is a source of fibre for good quality textile and the production of paper. Dried banana peel, due to its high content of tannin, is used to blacken leather. Medicinally, all parts of the plant - flowers, sap, leaves, etc. - have applications. Antifungal and antibiotic principles are found in the peel and pulp of ripe bananas.

Folklore wise, banana is regarded in some Asian culture as a symbol of fertility because of its continuous reproduction; fruits and young leaves are offered at weddings and to nursing mothers, who bathe in a decoction of leaves after childbirth.

Banana as a slang word: 'going bananas' or simply 'bananas' is going irrational and wild. 'Banana land' is a colloquial and not altogether complimentary name for Queensland, a state where the banana is a key crop. Even less complimentary is 'banana republic', a term coined for small volatile states of the American tropics (from their economic dependence on the export of bananas). And don't we just love the slapstick of slipping and falling after stepping on a banana peel performed by a top banana!



Edible pseudo stem

