



# The many uses of *Musa*

October 2003



The many uses of banana have been celebrated by people since ancient times. Agricultural historians believe that bananas were among the first plants to be domesticated and even before this time, it is possible that the wild ancestors of bananas were used by early fisherfolk in South East Asia, where bananas originated. The stems of these jungle weeds would have provided the fisherfolk with fibre, while the leaves would have provided wrapping material, and the inner leaf sheaths and male buds, food. Domestication is thought to have arisen due to mutations in seeded wild species, resulting in the production of plants with seedless, edible fruits.

Today the humble banana continues to have deep cultural significance in many parts of the world. It is a symbol of fertility and prosperity for many communities throughout Asia and Africa. Although bananas and plantains are best known as a food crop, almost every part of the plant can be used in one way or another. This may explain why in India the banana is popularly known as "kalpatharu", meaning "herb with all imaginable uses".

## Banana as a food

Sweet dessert bananas are generally eaten raw, while cooking bananas and plantains are boiled, steamed, fried or roasted. As the fruit has a limited shelf-life, processing is important. Many processing techniques can be used. Both bananas and plantains are often fried and made into chips. In some parts of Uganda, dried chips of the unripe fruit are stored as famine food. Sticky sweet banana figs are prepared in many parts of the tropics by semi-drying slices of ripe fruit. Banana flour is made by drying and grinding either the green or ripe fruit. In the tropics, the flour is widely used to make cookies and cakes. Mashed bananas may be frozen for later use in milk shakes, cakes and ice creams. In the Philippines, banana ketchup is widely used and sold commercially.

## Banana's other uses

### Medicinal use

Bananas are easy to digest and, since they are similar in chemical composition to the mucus of the stomach lining, have a soothing effect in the treatment of gastric ulcers and diarrhoea. In Australia, bananas are known as the 'good mood food', since the high Vitamin B6 content can help to relieve stress and

anxiety. In Africa, the pounded peels of ripe bananas are used to make a poultice for wounds and, as the inside of the peel has antiseptic properties it can be wrapped directly around wounds or cuts in an emergency. In the USA a natural extract from the pseudostem, patented under the name of CellQuest, is being sold as a dietary supplement and aid to prevent or cure cancer.

### Alcohol production

In Central and East Africa, the juice from the ripe fruit of varieties known as "beer bananas" is drunk fresh or fermented to make a drink with a low alcohol content. The beer is important nutritionally and is rich in vitamin B due to the yeast content. Bananas can also be used in the production of commercial or medicinal alcohol (ethanol).

### Source of fibre

Bananas and plantains are the source of a fibre used extensively in the manufacture of certain papers, particularly where great strength is required. The paper is used for, amongst other things making tea bags and Japanese yen notes. The fibre has numerous other uses, including in the manufacture of ropes, string and thread, and in the production of numerous handicrafts.

### Other uses

- Banana leaves make ideal umbrellas
- In Southeast Asia, banana leaves are used as disposable biological plates
- In many African and Asian countries, banana leaves are also used for thatching, for wrapping food during cooking, and as bowl and table covers.
- Starch extracted from banana and plantain pseudostems is used to produce glue.
- Bananas are used to provide shade for a range of crops including cocoa, coffee, black pepper and nutmeg.
- Seeds from wild bananas are used to make necklaces and ornaments in Papua New Guinea.
- Banana sap can be used as a dye



### How to make shampoo from bananas

- Collect unripe bananas and burn on a piece of zinc
- Gather the ash and pour 500g into 1 litre of water
- Mix well

The solution obtained can be used as a shampoo against dandruff.

Source: *La Voix du Paysan*, Cameroon, May 1998.

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INIBAP is a programme of the International Plant Genetic Resources Institute (IPGRI), a centre of

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