

South Pacific Commission

Community
Education
Training Centre



South
Pacific
Foods

Leaflet
1983

7

Banana

A tropical treat

Bananas are a good food for people living in the Pacific. They are covered by an easy-to-remove skin that keeps in the food value and keeps out germs that cause sickness.

These days there are many high-priced, imported snack foods in brightly coloured packages in stores. Bananas are also available, but in natural, easy-to-open packaging at an inexpensive price.

Easily grown and harvested, the banana plant gives many good tasting fruits if well cared for. The banana fruits can be easily prepared in many ways. Even the flower of the plant can be eaten. Best of all, bananas are available throughout the Pacific, in plantations, gardens, markets and stores.



Two kinds of bananas

Banana plants belong to the family with the scientific name *Musa*. There are many varieties of bananas, all different in flavour and appearance, but there are two main kinds:

Eating bananas are the sweeter varieties. They are eaten raw when ripe.

Cooking bananas (sometimes called plantains) are the starchy varieties. They are cooked before eating, even when they are ripe. These varieties, the first ones in the Pacific, are an important staple food.

The banana plant grows to 3 to 8 metres (10 to 25 feet) from an underground stem called a **corm**.

The corm sends up a shoot every year, which dies after it flowers

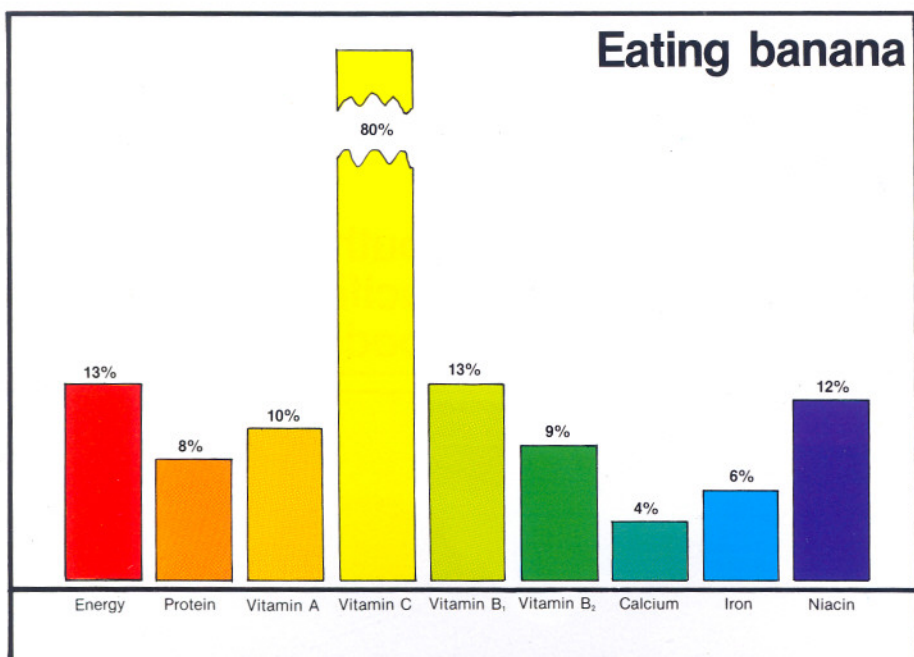
and fruits. The 'trunk' of the plant is really rolled leaf bases.

Banana plants grow well throughout the South Pacific, even on most atolls. In order to bear large crops, banana plants must be properly looked after and must not be overcrowded. The illustration on the left shows how they should be thinned. They are grown by planting corms, or suckers, taken from the base of old plants.

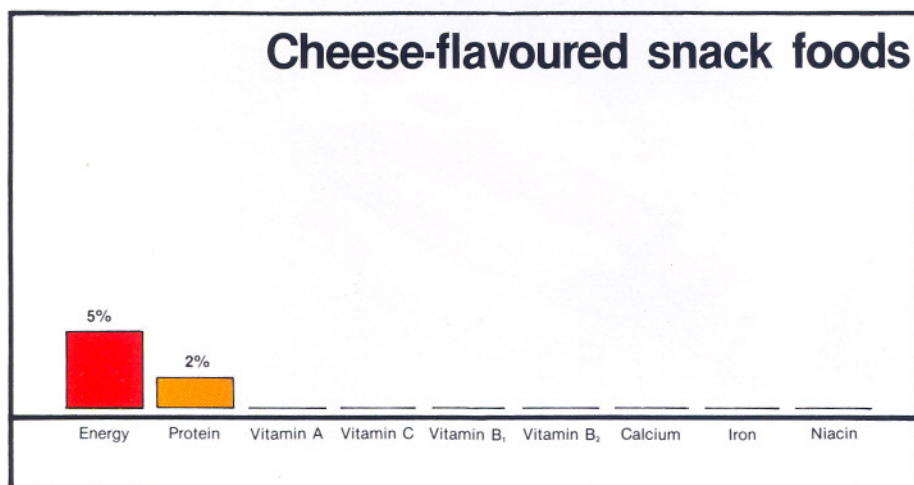
About one year after planting, banana plants fruit. They may fruit at any time during the year, but they are more likely to fruit in warm weather. Bananas may be harvested when three-quarters of the fruit on the stem are full size. To ripen the bananas, hang the bunch in an airy place. Sometimes other ripening methods, such as burying or using chemicals, are used.



Banana plants should be thinned so that there is only one bearing shoot, one follower, and one new sucker.



Percentage of daily needs of an adult woman, filled by two medium bananas¹



Percentage of daily needs of an adult woman, filled by one packet of cheese-flavoured snack foods²

Energy in two forms

Bananas contain a lot of **energy**, which the body needs for warmth, work and play. This energy comes from the sugar and starch in the bananas.

As the starch in green bananas is hard to digest, they must be cooked to be used by the body. As bananas ripen, the starch turns to sugar. Ripe bananas have the same energy value as green ones, but it is in sugar. Energy in ripe bananas is easily used by the body without cooking.

Bananas are a good source of **Vitamin C**, which keeps body tissues strong, helps the body use iron, and aids chemical actions in the body. They are also a good source of **Vitamin A**, which is needed for proper growth, healthy eyes, and protection from disease.

Bananas are an excellent source of minerals that are lost during diarrhoea. By eating bananas the lost nutrients are replaced.

The bar graphs show the food values of two foods that can be bought for the same price. Bananas have other nutrients in addition to energy and protein. Cheese-flavoured snack foods that are sold in brightly coloured packets have none of these important vitamins and minerals. Bananas are the better buy because they have more food value for the money spent.

The banana flower is a good source of Vitamin C and Vitamin A. It is a fair source of **calcium** and **iron**, which help make strong bones and teeth (calcium) and help keep the blood healthy (iron).

A weaning food

Ripe eating bananas are an excellent food for babies from 4–6 months on. They are very easy to digest and can supply the extra energy and vitamins that babies need. Making baby food at home with locally grown bananas is easy and saves money.

To prepare this baby food, peel the banana, remove any strings that may stick to it, and mash it well. Remember that a banana is protected from germs when it is in the skin. Using a clean cup and spoon helps to keep it germ free. Bananas prepared in this way can take the place of expensive cereal foods bought from the store.

Using bananas

Green bananas are used as starchy vegetables. They are not as nutritious as some starchy roots such as sweet potatoes or taro and should not take their place completely. They make a good starch for puddings. Green banana flour is used in the food industry.

Ripe bananas may be used in drinks, salads, meat dishes, sandwich fillings, cakes, or other desserts. Ripe eating bananas make a delicious snack. They are a good food for elderly or sick people because they are easily digested. When someone has diarrhoea, bananas should be eaten to replace nutrients that the body has lost.

Banana flowers are picked from the end of a bunch of bananas when the fruits are half grown. Removing the flower at this time will not hurt the fruit. Flowers from eating bananas have a bitter taste and should not be eaten. Only flowers from cooking varieties are eaten. They are used in meat, fish, or shellfish dishes.

Corms from a certain kind of banana that does not flower can be eaten. This kind grows in some places in the Pacific. The corm is eaten as a starchy vegetable.

Banana leaves are not eaten, but are used to wrap food. Use a clean, whole banana leaf and soften it by holding it over a flame. Cut the mid rib off the back so that the leaf lies flat. Cut the leaf to the size needed. After filling it with food, fold and tie with a mid rib from a coconut leaf.

Wrapping foods in banana leaves for school lunches or for selling at the market is cleaner than using newspapers. It is not as expensive as using imported foils or food

wraps. A nutritious way to cook foods is to wrap them in banana leaves and steam or bake them in an earth oven.

Preparation and preservation

For easy peeling, green bananas are boiled, steamed, or baked until they are soft, and then peeled. Traditionally, they are cooked in earth ovens or over hot coals. Sometimes, peeled green bananas are soaked in salty water and then baked. Another cooking method is to bake them grated or sliced and wrapped in leaves with coconut cream. Fermented paste made from green bananas may be baked in earth ovens as a cake.

Ripe cooking bananas boiled with coconut syrup make a tasty sweet dish. A traditional chiefly drink in some Pacific countries is prepared by pounding ripe eating bananas and mixing them with lemon-leaf-scented coconut cream. Ripe eating bananas, mashed and cooked with starch, make a cake with a jelly-like texture.

To prepare banana flowers, remove the tough outer layers. Slice thinly into sections as an onion is sliced. Wash in salty water, kneading to wash out all of the sap. Rinse in fresh water and use in salads, soups, or other dishes.

To prepare dried bananas, use the following method:

Dried bananas:

1. Choose firm, ripe eating bananas. Peel.
2. Slice and lay on a frame stretched with cloth.
3. Cover with thin netting. Dry the bananas in the sun, turning them two or three times a day. When they are dry, they are brown, but not hard. Drying takes three to six days.
4. Pack in jars or wrap in banana leaves to keep out any moisture.

Dried bananas make a delicious and inexpensive snack. If dried correctly, none of the nutrients is lost. Selling dried bananas as snacks is a good way to make money using a local food. Dried bananas can also be soaked and cooked, or added to dishes such as porridge before cooking.

Banana bread

Two loaves:

- 3½ cups flour
- 3 teaspoons baking powder
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1 teaspoon baking soda
- 2 cups mashed, ripe eating bananas
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice
- ¾ cup butter or margarine
- 1½ cups sugar
- 3 eggs
- ¾ cup milk

1. Sift together flour, baking powder, salt, and baking soda. Set aside.
2. Mash bananas with a fork. Add lemon juice and mix. Be sure the bananas are mashed well.
3. Cream together the butter or margarine and sugar, until they are well mixed. Add eggs and beat thoroughly until light.
4. Add the sifted ingredients to the egg mixture in small amounts, adding a little of the milk each time. Beat well after each addition.
5. Fold in the banana mixture. Mix well.
6. Pour mixture into two greased loaf pans. Bake in a moderate oven (180°C or 350°F) for about 1 hour.
7. Cool and serve.

Note: Instead of baking, this bread can also be steamed using the following method:

1. Start water boiling in a large pot with stones or shells in the bottom.
2. Grease 2 large clean tin cans.
3. Pour bread mixture into cans, no more than half full.
4. Cover can tops with grease-proof paper or a leaf.
5. Put the cans in the pot, resting on the stones or shells. Cover the pot.
6. Steam the bread for 1 hour, or until a knife comes out dry after it is put into the bread.

Banana rice

Six to eight servings:

- 2 cups rice uncooked
- 12 ripe eating bananas
- 1 coconut
- Salt to taste

1. Clean rice.
2. Peel and slice bananas.
3. Put rice and bananas in a pot. Add water to 5 cm (2 inches) above the rice and boil gently until cooked.
4. Grate coconut, add a little water, and squeeze out the cream. Add salt to taste.
5. When rice is cooked, mix in the coconut cream.
6. Serve hot or cold with greens or other vegetables.

Banana milk drink

One serving:

- 1 cup milk
- 1 ripe eating banana

1. Use fresh milk or prepare powdered milk by using 1 cup water to 4 tablespoons of milk powder.
2. Mash banana thoroughly.
3. Pour mashed banana into milk and stir well.
4. Serve in a glass.

Note: This is a good drink for babies and children. It is also a very refreshing drink for sick people.

1. From *Food composition tables for use in the Pacific Islands*, South Pacific Commission, 1983.
2. From *Fiji Nutrition Newsletter*, National Nutrition Committee, Volume 1, Number 2, p. 3.

Banana flower soup

Four servings:

- 2 cooking banana flowers
- 1 cup shelled shrimp or prawns
- 1 onion, sliced
- 4 tablespoons oil
- 2 cups water
- 4 cloves garlic, chopped (optional)
- Lemon and salt to taste

1. Remove the tough covering of the flower. Slice across into thin pieces. Squeeze it with salt and rinse. Set aside.
2. Mix the shrimp or prawns with the sliced onion and lemon juice.
3. Fry the garlic in the oil. Add the shrimp mixture.
4. Add the water and continue cooking.
5. Add the flowers. Turn over constantly until tender. Season with salt.
6. Serve hot.

Baked cooking banana and fish

Eight servings:

- 4 ripe cooking bananas
- 8 pieces of fish
- 1 onion, sliced
- 4 tomatoes (optional)
- Coconut cream from 2 coconuts
- Salt to taste

1. Peel bananas and slice.
2. Wrap the bananas and fish with the other ingredients in 4 banana leaf packages.
3. Place in a baking dish.
4. Bake in a moderate oven (180°C or 350°F) until the fish is tender (about 30 to 45 minutes).

Banana chips

Eight servings:

- 2 green cooking bananas
- Oil for frying
- Salt to taste

1. Pour oil into pot to heat.
2. Peel bananas and cut them into thin slices.
3. Put them on paper-covered plates and sprinkle with salt.
4. When oil is very hot, fry chips until they are a pale gold in colour.
5. Drain on paper. Serve at once.

Bananas in coconut cream

Six to eight servings:

- 6 ripe cooking bananas
- 1 cup grated coconut
- Coconut cream from 2 coconuts
- Sugar (optional)

1. Peel bananas and cut in half along their length.
2. Coat with grated coconut.
3. Place in baking dish. Sprinkle with sugar, if desired. Cover with coconut cream.
4. Bake in a moderate oven (180°C or 350°F) for 20 to 30 minutes.
5. Serve cold.

Stuffed green bananas

Six to eight servings:

- 6 green cooking bananas
- 225 g (8 oz) raw minced meat
- 1 onion, chopped
- Salt
- 1 egg, beaten

1. Without peeling, cut the bananas into halves along their length.
2. Scoop out the flesh with a spoon. Leave the peel boat-shaped.
3. Grate the banana flesh.
4. Mix the mince, chopped onion, and salt with the grated banana flesh. Add the beaten egg to bind the mixture.
5. Put the mixture back into the banana peels. Tie the halves together with string.
6. Steam for 25 minutes or bake in a moderate oven (180°C or 350°F) for 45 minutes.
7. Serve with gravy or a sauce made from cooked tomatoes, if desired.

This leaflet is the seventh of a series devoted to the uses of local Pacific foods. Other leaflets available in this series are:

Leaflet 1 – Taro
Leaflet 2 – Pawpaw
Leaflet 3 – Mango
Leaflet 4 – Guava
Leaflet 5 – Cassava
Leaflet 6 – Green leaves
Leaflet 8 – Coconut
Leaflet 9 – Breadfruit
Leaflet 10 – Pineapple
Leaflet 11 – Citrus fruits
Leaflet 12 – Pumpkin
Leaflet 13 – Sweet potato
Leaflet 14 – Yam
Leaflet 15 – Nuts and seeds
Leaflet 16 – Legumes
Leaflet 17 – Fish
Leaflet 18 – Seafoods

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