

Mind

Legend has it that a long time ago, in the Philippines, there was a beautiful girl named Raya who had the gift of communicating with the spirits of the forest. She fell in love with a handsome ghost-prince, who took on human form. Together, they had a child. However, the ghost-prince knew that eventually he would have to return to the spirit world. His broken heart was buried in the forest and from it sprang a tree, bearing flowers in the shape of his heart. The fruits looked like hands reaching out for his beloved Raya.

There are many legends and customs surrounding the banana tree. The banana plant has been regarded by the Hindus as a symbol of fertility and prosperity since ancient times. Today, Hindus often adorn the doorsteps of a newlywed couple's house with banana leaves and fruits. It is said that Malay women bathe in a brew of banana leaves for 15 days after childbirth. A banana plant is often placed in the corner of a rice field as a protective charm. Early Hawaiians used banana leaves as truce flags in wars.

What's really bananas? The banana tree is an herb. The banana tree is the biggest herb—reaching a height of 20 to 25 feet, with leaves as large as 9 feet. What constitutes an herb? According to the dictionary, an herb is “a seed-producing annual, biennial, or perennial that does not develop persistent woody tissue but dies down at the end of a growing season.” But wait: there's more! The banana fruit is technically a false berry, and the black part that sometimes remains on the end of the banana is a part of the flower.

Bananas come from the *Musa* plant family, native to Southwest Asia. Bananas are believed to have been first introduced into Europe in the tenth century A.D. and brought to the South American coast by the Portuguese in the early 1500s. From Eastern Indonesia they easily made the transition into Hawaii.

First cultivated some 7,000 years ago, the plant grows in tropical climates and can render up to 88 pounds or some 300 fruits per year without fertilization. This prolific plant will continuously sprout a leader stalk, produce flowers, and bear fruits—and then repeat the process by growing another stalk. Bananas and plantains constitute the fourth-largest fruit crop in the world, after grapes, citrus fruits, and apples, with a world production estimated at 28 million tons per year. That's a lot of bananas.

Edible bananas are classified into two main groups: *Sucrier* and *Gros Michel*. There are more than 400 varieties of bananas, but most of the bananas we find locally are the yellow Cavendish bananas. In the United States, Florida most often produces the Dwarf Cavendish, Apple, and Orinoco bananas, and the Macho plantain. The Red and Lady Finger bananas are occasionally grown in sheltered locations.

Here are some notable varieties:

1. The **Dwarf Cavendish**, first known from China and widely cultivated, has a medium-size fruit and must be handled and shipped with care due to its thin skin.
2. The **Giant Cavendish** is of uncertain origin. The fruits are larger than those of the Dwarf—and not as delicate.
3. **Silk, Silk Fig, and Manzana** (*apple* in Spanish) are the most popular dessert banana of the tropics. The plump bananas are astringent when unripe but pleasantly apple-scented when fully ripe.
4. The **Orinoco** banana is also known as the Burro (*donkey* in Spanish). This banana is shorter than the Cavendish and has a lemony flavor.
5. The **Red** (or Lal Kela) banana originated in India and has a strong taste. The purplish-red peel changes to orange-yellow, and the flesh is firm and cream-colored.
6. The **Lady Finger** banana bears small, sweet fruit. This variety is common in Latin America.
7. The **Ice Cream** banana of Hawaii is bluish with a silvery bloom when young and pale yellow when ripe. The flesh is white and sweet.
8. **Plantains** come in many forms, some with pink, red, or dark-brown leaf sheaths, some with colored mid-ribs or spots on leaves or fruits. A popular dwarf variety is the *Plantano enano* of Puerto Rico.

