

Banana: Origin and Distribution

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The origins of the banana are as complicated and perplexing as the nature of the banana's taxonomic origin themselves. Archaeologists believe that humans initially conquered the banana in the Kuk Valley of New Guinea in approximately 8,000 BCE (Before the Common Era). Furthermore, while this is the first documented instance of banana domestication, other spontaneous domestication operations may have taken place throughout Southeast Asia and the South



Pacific. As a result, while Kuk is the first known instance of banana domestication, it is unlikely to be the cradle from which all other domesticated species sprang.

The Kuk domesticated variety appears to have spread from New Guinea to the Philippines and subsequently dispersed far over the tropics. Researchers find it difficult to trace the banana's spread following its arrival in the Philippine islands, and in many cases, it appears the banana was brought into areas only to be reintroduced, hundreds or thousands of years later. Human ingenuity transformed the seedless, and thus asexual, forms of domesticated bananas into hybrids by careful culling and planting practices that fused and improved diverse domesticated varieties. As a result, the origins of



the banana have proven difficult to trace. Bananas, in general, are thought to have originated in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific between 8,000 and 5,000 BCE.

Bananas spread over the tropics in all directions from New Guinea to the Philippines. Bananas will likely arrive in India, Indonesia, Australia, and Malaysia within the first two millennia of domestication. Plantains may have been grown as early as 3000 BCE in eastern Africa and 1000 BCE in Madagascar. Between 500 BCE and 500 CE, the plantain had undoubtedly reached the African continent. The banana was mentioned in Buddhist literature as early as 600 BCE, and when Alexander the Great's adventures took him to India in 327 BCE, he came across the fruit. Perhaps most surprisingly, the banana may have arrived in South America far before Europeans, possibly as early as 200 BCE, transported by Southeast Asian sailors.

Bananas were spread and rediscovered for the second time around the Indian Ocean by the Islamic wave. In the 11th century BCE, the banana was mentioned in Islamic literature, and Muslim merchants transported it through trade routes to and from numerous locations in South Asia and the Middle East. The banana had made its way into North Africa and Moorish-controlled Spain by the 1200s. Islamists could also have transported the banana from east to west Africa.

A third wave of banana diffusion took place in both Asia and Europe. By the 1200s, Japanese gardeners were harvesting specific banana varieties for their fibres, which they used to make textiles for clothing and other garments. Japanese textiles manufactured from bananas might be soft enough to create valued kimonos and other traditional clothing, or coarse enough for use as table linen, thanks to the selective use of banana fibres and processing procedures involving lye soaks. Meanwhile, in Europe, the Moorish invaders most likely introduced the banana for the first time. By the 15th and 16th centuries, Portuguese sailors had carried the crop throughout Brazil, whence it most likely spread to the sugar plantation economies of the New World and the Caribbean.

Banana production and consumption were primarily limited to small-scale businesses in the ancient and early modern worlds. Though individual fingers, hands, and bunches were most likely available for sale through commercial exchanges, the majority of banana production took place on a modest scale for local consumption. The banana's value as a staple crop would have been well established, and its primary usage would have been as either the primary starch consumed or, given its non-seasonal character, as an essential buffer crop between other staple harvests. Large-scale activities were, however, prevalent, as evidenced by China's plantation complex and the presence of bananas in the colonial New World.



Plantains served two important functions on colonial plantations. The plant was first used as a valuable intercropping species. Coffee, chocolate, and pepper farms required indirect or variable sunlight, and the banana plant, with its towering leaves, provided the ideal crop to shade the lucrative commodities. Bananas were thus valuable not for their fruit, but for the cover their leaves offered for other, more vital plantation crops. Second, bananas were used to feed slaves on New World sugarcane farms. Bananas not only supplied a non-labour-intensive crop for plantation workers, but their easy digestion and high energy content provided an ideal source of calories for the gruelling manual labour of the cane fields. Plantains were becoming completely widespread in Central and South American countries and had even been "naturalized," or embraced and integrated into local cultures to the point where they became synonymous with particular countries' cuisines, such as Cuban food.

Thus, whether on large-scale or small-scale farms, the plantain was a vital staple for local sustenance during the ancient and early modern worlds. Even in Japanese industry, where banana plants were grown for textiles rather than food, the banana was grown for local markets. By the 1800s, and particularly in the early twentieth century, changes in production and consumption had transformed the banana from a local to a worldwide commodity.

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