

Lecture 36

Horticulture, Politics, and World Affairs: Bananas and the Banana Republics

The Banana: Tropical Fruit

Banana (*Musa sapientum*, Musaceae) is a gigantic tropical herb consisting of a pseudostem made up of leaf sheaths with an inflorescence pushing through the sheaths. The banana fruit is a staple in tropical countries and was consumed before recorded history in southeast Asia. There are basically two types, bananas (consumed mostly as fresh fruit) and plantains (cooking bananas).

Banana was cultivated in Southeast Asia in antiquity and known by reputation to Theophrastus. Alexander saw it in India. Banana was introduced to the Mediterranean region in the year 650 and introduced to Africa before European contact, probably by Arab traders. Commercial production was initiated in the Canary Islands and trade was established with the UK in the 1800s.

The history of the banana industry began in Latin America during the last half of the 19th century. Captain Lorenzo D. Baker and Minor C. Keith introduced the first bananas to Boston and the Northeast between 1870 and 1889. The fruit was an immediate success and American entrepreneurs sought to control both banana production and trade. The subsequent exploits of North American sea captains, railroad builders, and adventurers became the precursors and then the founders of the United Fruit Company in 1899, a company that became a plantation and shipping monopoly. These efforts were to make the banana one of the first fresh foods to be internationally commercialized. At the present time, bananas of high quality are available year round at moderate prices the world over. It was and is a significant horticultural achievement.

Bananas and Colonialism

The early years of the industry were marked by the aggressive action of the United Fruit Company in the unstable frontier environment of Central America. The industry was unique because no other perishable produce was carried such a long distance to market, and was available without regard to season. The industrial and market structure was called “industrial colonialism” and became the subject of constant and bitter controversy. The United Fruit Company was accused, often justifiably, of monopoly exploitation, political manipulation, abuse of native labor, disregard for human hardships, and preemptory management tactics. A single large American company was to directly interfere with the political fortunes of a number of Central American countries, admittedly corrupt and greedy, and led to persistent revolutions and coups. Still today, many of these countries have been branded with the epithet, “Banana Republics,” a shameful period of US-Latin American interaction. With the present World Trade Organization, the banana wars continue between European and American companies vying to divide and dominate the world market for bananas.



Thomas Johnson's edition, 1633, of Gerard's Herball. Woodcut made from a drawing by Johnson of the bunch of bananas which he hung up in his shop.