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Banana *Musa paradisiaca* and other spp.

Musaceae Banana family

Description: Tender evergreen perennial herb, with large palm-like leaves, and growing to 2–6m high (6.5–20ft); hanging, red 'cigar' flower and bunches of 'finger' fruit that are green on the branch and yellow on ripening.

Distribution: Probably originating in India and SE Asia, now cultivated widely in the tropics and subtropics; 40 wild species and over 300 cultivars are known. Dessert bananas are descended from the wild species *Musa acuminata*, while the plantains and other cooking bananas also have genes from *M. balbisiana*.

Parts used: Fruit, skin (leaves and root have various applications in banana-growing areas).



Found in kitchens around the world, bananas are the most popular fruit and the largest, most productive herb of all. They are a good source of potassium, and a mood food. The skins are also useful for treating insect bites and age spots.

Banana is not really a tree but the largest herb known – a perennial with a 'trunk' of overlapping and semi-rigid coarse leaves. It is the most productive herb too, with 10 to 20 bananas per hand, up to 15 hands per bunch, and several bunches per plant per year.

It is now the most popular fruit in the world. A recent survey showed that 95% of Britons buy bananas regularly, and over twenty years ago it supplanted the apple as the nation's favourite fruit. Britons, like Americans, eat on average two to three bananas a week. Such a demand makes banana the fourth most traded food internationally (after rice, wheat and maize),

although most bananas grown are not traded at all, being subsistence food for small farmers in the tropics and subtropics.

Use bananas for...

Why are bananas so popular? It is partly the convenience of the wonderful natural packaging, and the fact you can eat the whole contents – there are no seeds (all bananas are grown from suckers, so they are genetically clones of the parent plant and the seeds are vestigial).

Bananas are rightly acknowledged as a superb source of instant, absorbable energy in the form of glucose, fructose and sucrose – excellent for athletes and children. Reputedly they are richer in minerals than any other soft fruit except strawberries, almost as high in pectin fibre as apples, and have a good complement of vitamins.

Bananas are now known to have bioavailable tryptophan, an amino acid the brain uses to make serotonin. Serotonin is a neurotransmitter that controls gut movements and also affects mood, appetite, learning and the memory.

Bananas are a cooling food, and effective at settling the stomach in most people. Banana purée is a safe infant food, and banana smoothies with honey are touted as a hangover cure.

As a ready source of potassium, bananas are useful in osteoporosis diets, as restoration of potassium levels implies less loss of calcium. This potassium effect is also seen in lower blood pressure, stress and hypoglycaemia, through reduction of the damaging LDL cholesterol in the blood and raising that of the beneficial HDL.

Bananas may be used to help treat anaemia as their iron content stimulates production of haemoglobin in the blood.

Finally, don't just discard your banana skin. Its inside is cooling on a bruise or sunburn, and for mosquito bites, as an emergency poultice or for treating liver spots. But, sorry, those 1960s stories about the skins' hallucinogenic properties were just a pipe dream.

Banana almond smoothie

Blend until smooth: 1 ripe **banana**, 1½ cups of **almond milk** and ¼ teaspoonful of **cardamom powder**.

Options: Add a teaspoon of **vanilla extract** to increase the feel-good factor, or a teaspoonful of **honey** if you want it sweeter.

Banana skin

Peel a banana and rub the inside of the **skin** on insect bites, sunburn or any hot itchy skin condition for cooling relief. Banana skins can also be used daily on the backs of the hands to lighten age and liver spots.



Bananas growing in Madeira, February

Banana almond smoothie

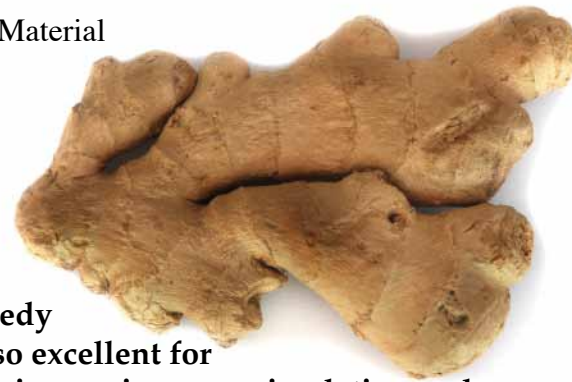
- low mood
- low energy
- hypoglycaemia
- muscle cramps

Banana skin

- insect bites
- sunburn
- age spots
- liver spots

Ginger

Zingiber officinale



Ginger is the best natural remedy for nausea of all types. It is also excellent for strengthening weak digestion, improving poor circulation and warming any cold conditions of the body. It clears phlegm from the lungs and induces sweating, making it a beneficial treatment for colds and other infections.

As everyone knows, ginger is 'hot'! A 'ginger group' is one that gets things moving. Technically, the rhizome of this tropical plant is pungent and sweet, but it is ginger's warming effects on the body, in food and medicine (and aphrodisiac use) that has made it one of the chief spices of trade from the East since ancient times.



Zingiberaceae Ginger family

Description: A deciduous tropical perennial, with a thick, finger-like aromatic root or rhizome.

Distribution: Native to tropical Asia, and widely grown in the tropics worldwide.

Related species: There are around 100 species in the ginger family, and many of them are used in cooking and medicine, including cardamom, galangal and turmeric.

Parts used: Rhizome.

*Nose, nose, jolly red nose, who gave thee this jolly red nose?
Nutmegs and ginger, cinnamon and cloves,
And they gave me this jolly red nose.*
– Beaumont & Fletcher (1609), based on an older drinking song

The English name is derived from the Sanskrit term *Singabera*, which became Latin *Zingiber* and later 'ginger'.

In tropical countries, fresh ginger is the form predominantly used in cooking while temperate pantries are more likely to have powdered dry ginger or crystallised ginger on hand. In the last two decades, though, fresh ginger has become more widely available worldwide, with China, Thailand and Brazil the main exporters of the beige-coloured roots found in our shops.

In Ayurveda, India's ancient system of healing, ginger is effectively a universal medicine, benefiting all people and all diseases. It increases digestive fire, clears toxins from the body and improves circulation – three key actions that would indeed help most conditions.

Ginger has been cultivated for so long that it rarely grows as a wild plant. It was a prized import to the Roman empire, where it was primarily used as a medicine.

Lemon

Citrus limon, C. medica var. *limonum*



Lemon is a remarkably versatile fruit, offering sour, slightly sweet, bitter, acid and astringent tastes; each of these qualities widens its medicinal and culinary value. Known universally for its vitamin C content and action on scurvy and as a domestic cold and 'flu treatment, it has other applications as varied as arteriosclerosis and anorexia, and supports the immune system and liver.

The name 'lemon' comes from north Indian *limu* or *ninbu*, via Arabic *limun* and Latin *limon*, the small changes encapsulating many centuries in the plant's botanical history from Indian origin, Arab cultivation and trade to wider scientific acceptance.

Lemons became widely cultivated in southern Europe and north Africa in areas controlled by the Arabs, but the fruit remained rare and expensive in northern parts of the continent beyond medieval times. Louis XIV's court in France later popularised the use of lemon in cooked sauces and refreshing drinks, and its many culinary and medicinal possibilities belatedly began to be recognised.

Early in its history, lemon was used more often as a preservative and to render questionable meat safe to eat. Medicinally it developed a reputation for dealing with poisons and intestinal worms. Today's squeeze of lemon on freshly opened oysters or shellfish echoes such older preventative uses.



Lemon's strength of action is still valued in commercial cleaning agents as an antibacterial and germicidal; it is known to kill many dangerous bacilli, including those for typhoid and cholera, and is a general kitchen antiseptic. In older herbals lemon was recommended for treating stone in the kidney and bladder and for gravel in the liver; these uses, interestingly, still persist in Ayurveda but less so in western herbal tradition.

Rutaceae Rue family

Description: A small tree, 3–6m (10–20ft) high, with irregular branches and thorns, evergreen pale green and oval leaves, clustered white and pink flowers, and the familiar ovoid fruit, about 8cm (3in) long, pale yellow, skin pitted with oil glands and an acidic pale yellow pulp.

Habitat: Subtropical, semi-desert areas; largely cultivated.

Distribution: Native to N India, Burma and SW China and still wild there; widely cultivated in the Mediterranean, California and places with similar climate.

Related species: Citron (*C. medica*), lime (*C. aurantiifolia*), bergamot orange (*C. aurantium* var. *bergamia*).

Parts used: Fruit, peel (commercially *Limonis cortex*), juice (*L. succus*), oil (*Oleum limonis*).

My living [diocese] in Yorkshire was so far out of the way, that it was actually twelve miles from a lemon.
– Rev. Sydney Smith (early nineteenth century)