

# **Go Bananas! Run For It!**

*By Oana Harrison*

Slipping on a banana peel might be an old time giggle-inspiring occurrence but monkey business aside, bananas are no laughing matter when it comes to your health. From replenishing your energy after a run to reconditioning your hair to delighting your taste buds, these faux berries have mighty powers.

## **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 and 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. As custom will have it, Hindus 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 fifteen 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. Nowadays, the word "bananas" is used to describe anything in style or cool.

The crazy thing is that the banana tree is... an herb. It's actually the biggest herb there is, reaching a height of 20 to 25 feet, with leaves as large as 9 feet. What constitutes an herb? According to the Merriam-Webster 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 South West Asia. They 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 it can render up to 88 pounds or some 300 fruits per year without needing fertilization. This prolific plant will continuously sprout a leader stalk, produce flowers, bear fruits then repeat the process by growing another stalk. Bananas and plantains constitute the fourth largest fruit crop of the world, after grapes, citrus fruits and apples, with a world production estimated at 28 million tons per year.

Edible bananas are classified into two main groups: 'Sucrier' and 'Gros Michel'. There are over 400 varieties of bananas, but most of the bananas we find locally are the yellow Cavendish

bananas. In the US, 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:

- 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.
- The ‘Giant Cavendish’ is of uncertain origin and it closely resembles the ‘Gros Michel’. The fruits are larger than those of the ‘Dwarf’ and not as delicate.
- ‘Silk’, ‘Silk Fig’, or ‘Manzana’ (meaning ‘Apple’ in Spanish), is the most popular dessert banana of the tropics. The plump bananas are astringent when unripe but pleasantly apple-scented when fully ripe.
- ‘Orinoco’ banana is also known as ‘Horse’, ‘Hog’, or ‘Burro’ (meaning ‘Donkey’ in Spanish). This banana is shorter than the Cavendish and it has a lemony flavor.
- The ‘Red’ or ‘Lal Kela’ banana originated in India has a strong taste. The purplish-red peel changes to orange-yellow and the flesh is firm, cream-colored.
- ‘Lady Finger’ variety bears small, sweet fruit and is also known as ‘Date’, ‘Fig’, or ‘Dedo de Dama’. This variety is common in Latin America.
- ‘Ice Cream’ banana of Hawaii is bluish with a silvery bloom when young and pale yellow when ripe. The flesh is white and sweet.
- ‘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.

## **Body**

Bananas have a lot to offer, both for nutrition and for relieving the symptoms of numerous ailments. Bananas are rich in vitamins, minerals and fiber. They contain iron, which combats anemia, potassium, which lowers blood pressure and bone loss and vitamin B6 supporting balanced blood-glucose levels. Bananas are also good-mood-food, containing tryptophan, serotonin, and norepinephrine, which act as antidepressant and calming agents. They are also helpful in preventing age-related macular degeneration of the retina and strokes.

According to the Journal of Biological Chemistry published by the University of Michigan, bananas can hamper the spread of HIV virus in the body through their content of proteins known as lectins. Naturally occurring in bananas, lectins attach to foreign sugars, like those found in the HIV virus, inhibiting the virus’ mutation and weakening its resistance. Researchers found that lectins blocked HIV viruses as efficiently as two different modern HIV drugs.

Bananas are good for people with ulcers or heartburn because they lower gastric juice levels and build a protective coating in the stomach. They contain pectin, which is known to alleviate constipation naturally. They are a great baby-food, as they are easily digestible and non-allergic.

The bananas’ content of carbs, potassium, magnesium and vitamin B also make them a healthy choice for sports nutrition. Darren Brown, is the Program Coordinator and Head Coach for

RunKNOX, non-profit organization dedicated to running programs and community health. He advises his runners to incorporate a banana in their meal whenever possible. However, he points out that bananas contain starchy carbs, which lead to blood sugar imbalance. He suggests making a well-rounded meal by mixing a banana with peanut butter, which is high in protein and wheat bread, which contains complex carbs.

Amy Lambert is a beginner runner with RunKNOX. She writes a blog for women about running, cooking, beauty, DIY projects and better living, called Coffee, Scarves and Running Shoes. “I ran my first 5K in the spring of 2012 and I trained for subsequent 5Ks at faster times later in the fall,” Amy says. “While I was doing the short distance training, I fueled before my run with a banana or toast with honey or jam, and carried water while running using a handheld water bottle. However, as I went further into my training, I realized I needed more fuel to keep my energy levels up during and after my run, as well as replenish my electrolytes.”

Electrolytes are minerals in your blood and other body fluids that break into small, electrically charged particles called ions. Electrolytes regulate your body’s fluids, helping to maintain a healthy blood pH balance, and creating the electrical impulses essential to all aspects of muscle activity. Common electrolytes include: calcium, magnesium, phosphorus, potassium, chloride and sodium.

With 3 out of 6 electrolytes, bananas are good for pre or post workout nutrition. When eaten before the workout, the carbs in bananas provide energy, while their potassium, magnesium and vitamin B help recuperate after and the workout, keeping your muscles from cramping up.

If that weren’t enough, bananas bring another bragging right to the table. They contain a type of starch called resistant starch, which is a type of indigestible fiber blocking the conversion of some carbs, promoting fullness and increasing fat burning. However, bananas contain only 2-4 g of fiber, which might not be enough to make them a food source of fiber (3.5 – 4.9 g per serving).

Because of their natural sweetness, bananas may help curb cravings for refined sugars (doughnuts anyone?) and other unhealthy sweet snacks. Bananas are low in calories, ranging from 72 to 135 calories. The low caloric content of bananas prompted the “Morning Banana Diet” in Japan, which recommended eating bananas for breakfast, drinking water, eating a regular lunch and dinner, and nothing past 8pm. The diet became so popular that it led to a shortage of bananas in the stores. However, bananas still contain 10-20 grams of sugar and despite their fiber content, a carb-based meal usually leads to hunger shortly. The best bet is to blend the banana with a cup of low-fat plain yogurt for added protein and start your day with a balanced smoothie.

Beauty is on the inside and your hair will agree. The living roots (follicles) of your hair need protein for nourishment. Bananas can provide proteins, carbohydrates, vitamin B6 and biotin, which help strengthen your hair’s outer layer, the cuticle. Iron also stimulates hair growth and renewal. You can put the finishing touches on your mane by mixing up a mask using bananas, coconut milk and honey.

The powers of the banana don't stop at the fruit. Rub the inside of a banana peel on your skin to dry off blemishes or to tame the itch from a mosquito bite. The peels are also great as fertilizers and they can do miracles for your rose garden!

## **Soul**

What's better for the soul than spending time outdoors, doing something fun? As we know, fall is the best time of the year in Knoxville. When the cool fall weather and beautiful foliage settle in, take the opportunity to be outside more. While you're at it, start a new exercise routine before the holidays come along. Give running a try. As Darren of RunKNOX says, "the best time to start running is now." He points out that "you don't have to be a fast runner, you just have to know how much you want to challenge yourself. The main thing is to find it enjoyable, so as to continue training year-round." You can incorporate walking and even take breaks from running. "We are here to coach you along and help you make the best choices for exercising, hydration and nutrition while you train."

Running is known to stimulate the production of serotonin in the brain, putting you in a better mood. It is also great for your lungs, your immune system and your cholesterol levels. RunKNOX is also a good support group and provides great socializing opportunities. So get out there and connect: with nature and with people!

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