

Banana

split



Chimps' fruit faces – slippery future

BY STEPHANIE HALL
Staff Reporter

Along with the woolly mammoth and eight track tapes, the banana might soon find itself on the road to extinction.

In 2005, Popular Science magazine published an article describing the imminent demise of the banana. After the article ran, there was continued controversy among experts about the dramatization of the banana's future.

Randy Ploetz, a pathologist from the University of Florida-Gainesville, is one of the experts involved in the story in Popular Science. He said that the view that bananas will go extinct is exaggerated.

"It has been overblown that it's headed for extinction," Ploetz said. "The banana is a diverse crop — the Cavendish is only a part of the banana world. There are a lot of different types of bananas."

The Cavendish is the most common type of banana that Americans eat. Ploetz said the main threat to the Cavendish is the Tropical Race 4 disease. Although the imminent extinction of the banana might seem unlikely, one type of banana already met its demise in the mid-1960s. The Cavendish banana actually is America's replacement for the Gros Michel or "Big Mike" banana, which was wiped out by Tropical Race 1 disease.

Ploetz said Tropical Race 1 initially was spread by the exportation of banana suckers, or subordinate shoots from banana plants, to start new plantations. From there the disease was transported onto machetes and machinery and made its way to the water supply, which further spread the epidemic.

The Cavendish is immune to Tropical Race 1 but



Brian O'Shaughnessy/Index
Sophomore Peter Park adds a banana to his meal in the Centennial dining hall. Some parts of the world, including the U.S., might see fewer strains of this fruit due to diseased crops.

is susceptible to Tropical Race 4.

Freshman Felipe Vasquez spent the last two summers working with his dad at Lapanday, a fruit research facility in the Philippines.

Vasquez said the Tropical Race 4 fungi attacks and eats the leaves, which collect nutrients from the sun.

Vasquez said commercial bananas do not have seeds and are unable to reproduce on their own. At Lapanday, researchers use cell division to cultivate more plants, he said.

"With one cell you can grow up to 100 banana plants," Vasquez said.

"The disease is already spreading fast. It has spread pretty far in the last 10 years."

Randy Ploetz
University of Florida-Gainesville Pathologist

you take two different routes with a similar banana plant ... 10 years later their genetic compo-

These plants are used in research on the genetic differences in the cells, he said.

Vasquez said that although all the genetics are supposed to be the same, cells often experience genetic jumps. These jumps, unexplainable by scientists, occur when a cell skips or changes a gene.

"It turns out, if you take two different routes with a similar banana plant ... 10 years later their genetic compo-

sition is significantly different even though they are supposed to be the same," Vasquez said.

Researchers at Lapanday are looking for a strain of banana plants that are resistant to Tropical Race 4 disease.

"They've gotten some developments but nothing major," Vasquez said. "They have found some [cells] that are more susceptible, but [they have found] some that are not completely resistant to [Tropical Race 4] but more resilient than others."

Companies spend a lot of money on research, Vasquez said. However, no company has produced anything obtainable.

"[We] really don't have a good replacement [for the Cavendish] that produces high yields," Plo-

A-peeling facts

- As bananas ripen, the starches in the fruit turn to sugars, so riper bananas taste sweeter.
- The average American consumes more than 28 pounds of bananas annually (1.5 bananas per week).
- Bananas actually are giant herbs of the genus *Musa* in the same family as lilies, orchids and palms. They are the largest plants on earth without a woody stem. Their fleshy underground stem, or rhizome, contains many buds like a potato.
- Bananas can be stored in the refrigerator. The fruit will ripen and stay fresh even though the peel may become dark.

Reporting by Leah Bowring/Index
Source: International Banana Association

etz said. "The closest is a mix of clones with some tolerance in Taiwan."

Ploetz said he and his team are working on a new test that will be able to detect the fungus quickly. Currently the test takes about three weeks to detect the disease.

Although the loss in America might mean banana splits are taken off the menu, in some parts of the world it means a lot more, he said.

"[Tropical Race 4] is found in several countries where plantains are considered a food source," Ploetz said. "Bananas are considered a [major] food source in West Africa and parts of Latin America."

Tropical Race 4 is primarily found in Southeast Asia and parts of the Eastern Hemisphere, Ploetz said. Ploetz said his main goal is keeping the fungus out of Latin America, where the United States gets most of its bananas.

"[We are having] a series of meetings, the first in Ecuador then Costa Rica in 2009," Ploetz said. "[We are speaking] with quarantining personnel on ways to safely transfer the product [and] teaching them what they should and should not do and what [is] safe and not safe."

Ploetz said he thinks re-

searchers first should educate the public about the disease, then learn how to detect the disease and finally develop protocols and plans to deal with a potential outbreak.

Harper Higgins, produce manager at the Hy-Vee in Kirksville, said the banana is the No. 1-selling fruit.

"I heard something about [the banana extinction] three years ago, but I haven't heard anything about it since then," Higgins said.

Lately bananas have seen a spike in price as much as 20 cents, but Higgins attributes this to poor weather conditions in Honduras where Hy-vee gets its bananas.

The Kirksville Hy-Vee alone orders about 4,000 pounds of bananas every week.

Although the banana is the No. 1 selling fruit in America, it still is in danger, Higgins said.

"The disease is already spreading fast," Ploetz said. "It has already spread pretty far in the last 10 years."

Ploetz said it is only a matter of time before the disease reaches the Western Hemisphere.

"[It's] not a question of if, but when," Ploetz said. "[It is] human nature to bring stuff in. People don't like to be told what they can't do. So I would have to say ... stay tuned."

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