

Bananas!!! Bananas!!!

Nancy Zrymiak tells us about the many uses and curiosities of the banana... herb!

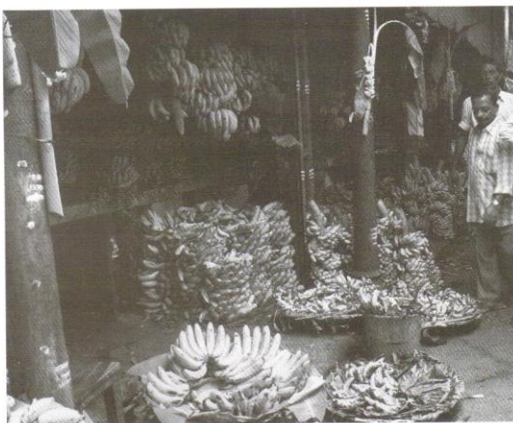
To have a banana tree outside ones bedroom window is an extraordinary thing...for a Canadian. Each time I walk by the window or sit on the patio I admire the banana tree with its tall stalk and long, bright green leaves.

I often think about the many uses for the banana leaves. The small ones make great placemats or even plates. The large ones can take the place of a tablecloth. During monsoon a giant leaf can substitute for an umbrella in a pinch. The leaves are abundant and the Indian people customarily use banana leaves to decorate their homes, temples and vehicles during festivals and ceremonies.

One day, as I marvelled at my tree, I noticed a strange thing. A large alien mass drooped down from one of the leaves. I jumped out of my chair and ran over to see what it was. A purple pod had appeared and behind it – several miniature bananas.

I took pictures every few days as if it some miracle had happened. A banana tree that actually produces bananas! But then I got to thinking about the tree and after a bit of research discovered some curious information. The most curious of all is that the banana tree is not a tree at all. It is a perennial herb! A tree has woody tissue, whereas the banana stalk is made up of tightly wrapped leaves.

The banana stem itself, grows underground, horizontally providing many shoots. The true stem shoots up through the



The Rangoli 12/2009

wrapped leaves. The pod appears with tiny flowers behind it, and they quickly open into rows and rows of bananas.

No wonder the Indian people wrap food in a banana leaf. The aromatic leaves of the herb add to the flavour of many dishes. Fish, chicken, vegetables and even curries can be steamed, baked or grilled in a leaf. Food cooked and served in a banana



Photos by Nancy Zrymiak

leaf is not only convenient (less dishes to wash), but smells and looks exotic.

In the Hindu culture the banana plant (banana herb just doesn't sound right) is a symbol of fertility and prosperity, due to its continuous reproduction. The leaves and bananas are left on doorsteps of houses where marriages are taking place.

Of course, bananas are full of nutritional value, being high in potassium, iron, carbohydrates and vitamins. They give us energy, great for eating right before exercising or playing a sport. They make us more alert for school or work, and fill us up, so we are less likely to crave unhealthy snacks.

As well, the high potassium, low sodium combination of the banana helps reduce blood pressure and cut the risk of strokes. It has an antacid effect and is beneficial in reducing heartburn and protecting against and treating stomach ulcers.

Nowadays, when I pass by my banana plant, I see the fruit ripening before my eyes. I think about all the ways to eat those tasty bananas. Simply peel and eat, as the monkeys do; that's the healthy and easy way. I am looking forward to banana smoothies, banana pancakes, and banana bread. But, top of my list is banana flambé with coconut ice cream - chocolate sauce optional, of course!