

Ensete ventricosum

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Ensete ventricosum, by Walter Hood Fitch (1861)

Scientific classification

Kingdom:	Plantae
(unranked):	Angiosperms
(unranked):	Monocots
(unranked):	Commelinids
Order:	Zingiberales
Family:	Musaceae
Genus:	<i>Ensete</i>
Species:	<i>E. ventricosum</i>

Binomial name

Ensete ventricosum
(Welw.) Cheesman

Synonyms

- *Ensete arnoldianum* (De Wild.) Cheesman
- *Ensete bagshawei* (Rendle & Greves) Cheesman
- *Ensete buchananii* (Baker) Cheesman
- *Ensete davyae* (Stapf) Cheesman
- *Ensete edule* Bruce ex Horan.
- *Ensete fecundum* (Stapf) Cheesman
- *Ensete holstii* (K.Schum.) Cheesman
- *Ensete laurentii* (De Wild.) Cheesman
- *Ensete proboscideum* (Oliv.) Cheesman
- *Ensete ruandense* (De Wild.) Cheesman
- *Ensete rubronervatum* (De Wild.) Cheesman
- *Ensete schweinfurthii* (K.Schum. & Warb.) Cheesman
- *Ensete ulugurense* (Warb. & Moritz) Cheesman

- *Ensete ventricosum* var. *montbeliardii* (Bois) Cufod.
- *Mnasion theophrasti* Pritz. [Invalid]
- *Musa arnoldiana* De Wild.
- *Musa bagshawei* Rendle & Greves
- *Musa buchananii* Baker
- *Musa davyae* Stapf
- *Musa ensete* J.F.Gmel.
- *Musa fecunda* Stapf
- *Musa holstii* K.Schum.
- *Musa kaguna* Chiov.
- *Musa laurentii* De Wild.
- *Musa martretiana* A.Chev.
- *Musa proboscidea* Oliv.
- *Musa ruandensis* De Wild.
- *Musa rubronervata* De Wild.
- *Musa schweinfurthii* K.Schum. & Warb.
- *Musa ulugurensis* Warb. & Moritz
- *Musa ventricosa* Welw.

Ensete ventricosum, commonly known as the **Ethiopian banana**, **Abyssinian banana**, **false banana**, or **ensete**, is a species of flowering plant in the genus *Ensete* of the banana family Musaceae. The name *Ensete ventricosum* was first published in 1948 in the Kew Bulletin, 1947, p. 101. Its synonyms include *Musa arnoldiana* De Wild., *Musa ventricosa* Welw. and *Musa ensete* J.F.Gmel. It is native to the eastern edge of the Great African Plateau, extending northwards from the Transvaal through Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Malawi, Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania to Ethiopia, and west to the Congo, being found in high rainfall forests on mountains, and along forested ravines and streams.

Description

A large non-woody tree (actually a gigantic monocarpic evergreen perennial) up to 6 m (20 ft) tall, it has a stout trunk of tightly overlapping leaf bases, and large banana-like leaf blades of up to 5 m (16 ft) tall by 1 m (3 ft 3 in) wide, with a salmon-pink midrib. The flowers, which only occur once from the centre of the tree at the end of the tree's life, are in massive pendant thyrses covered by equally large pink bracts. The fruits are similar to those of the domestic banana, are edible but insipid, with hard, black, rounded seeds. After flowering the plant dies back.

Use as a foodcrop

"Enset provides more amount of foodstuff per unit area than most cereals. It is estimated that 40 to 60 enset plants occupying 250-375 sq. meters can provide enough food for a family of 5 to 6 people." – Country Information Brief, FAO June 1995

Enset (*E. ventricosum*) is Ethiopia's most important root crop, a traditional staple in the densely populated south and southwestern parts of Ethiopia.^[1] Its importance to the diet and economy of the Gurage and Sidama peoples was first recorded by Jerónimo Lobo.^[2] The root is the main edible portion as its fruit is insipid. Each plant takes four to five years to mature, at which time a single root will give 40 kg of food. Due to the long period of time from planting to harvest, plantings need to be staggered over time, to ensure that there is enset available for harvest in every season. Enset will tolerate drought better than most cereal crops.

Wild enset plants are produced from seeds, while most domesticated plants are propagated from suckers. Up to 400 suckers can be produced from just one mother plant. In 1994 3,000 km² of enset were grown in Ethiopia, with a harvest estimated to be almost 10 tonnes per hectare. Enset is often intercropped with sorghum, although the practice amongst the Gedeo is to intercrop it with coffee.^[3] It is a major crop, although often supplemented with cereal crops,

amongst the following people indigenous to southern Ethiopia: the Aari, Basketo, Dime, Dizi, Gamo, Gedeo, Gimira, Goffa, Gurage, Hadiya, Dubamo (Danta), Kafficho, Kambaata, Konta, Kullo, Maji, Mao, some Oromo groups, Sheko, Sidama, Welayta, Yem, Uba and the Zala.^[4]

However its value as a famine food has fallen due to a number of causes, as detailed in the April 2003 issue of the UN-OCHA Ethiopia unit's *Focus on Ethiopia*:

Apart from an Enset plant disease epidemic in 1984-85 which wiped out large parts of the plantations and created the green famine, in the past 10 years major factors were recurrent drought and food shortage together with acute land shortage that forced farmers more and more into consumption of immature plants. Hence farmers were overexploiting their Enset reserves thereby causing gradual losses and disappearance of the false banana as an important household food security reserve. Even though not all the plant losses can be attributed to drought and land shortage and hence early consumption of immature crops, estimations go as far as more than 60% of the false banana crop stands have been lost in some areas in SNNPR during the last 10 years. This basically means that a great many people who used to close the food gap with false banana consumption are not able to do so any more, and lacking a viable alternative, have become food insecure and highly vulnerable to climatic and economic disruptions of their agricultural system.^[5]

The young and tender tissues in the centre or heart of the tree (the growing point) are cooked and eaten, being tasty and nutritious and very like the core of palms and cycads. In Ethiopia, more than 150 000 ha are cultivated for the starchy staple food prepared from the pulverised trunk and inflorescence stalk. Fermenting these pulverised parts results in a food called *kocho*. *Bulla* is made from the liquid squeezed out of the mixture and sometimes eaten as a porridge, while the remaining solids are suitable for consumption after a settling period of some days. Mixed kocho and bulla can be kneaded into dough, then flattened and baked over a fire. Kocho is in places regarded as a delicacy, suitable for serving at feasts and ceremonies such as weddings, when wheat flour is added. The fresh corm is cooked like potatoes before eating. Dry kocho and bulla are energy-rich and produce from 1400 to 2000kJ per 100g.

Other uses

The plant is quick-growing and often cultivated as an ornamental plant. In frost-prone areas it requires winter protection under glass. It has gained the Royal Horticultural Society's Award of Garden Merit.

A good quality fibre, suitable for ropes, twine, baskets, and general weaving, is obtained from the leaves. Dried leaf-sheaths are used as packing material, serving the same function as Western foam plastic and polystyrene. The entire plant is used to feed livestock.^[6]

History

In 1769 the celebrated Scottish traveller James Bruce first sent a description and quite accurate drawings of a tree common in the marshes around Gondar in Abyssinia, confidently pronounced it to be "no species of *Musa*" and wrote that its local name was "ensete". In 1853 the British Consul at Mussowah sent some seeds to Kew Gardens, mentioning that their native name was *ansett*. Kew, quite understandably, did not make the connection, especially as they had never before seen such seeds. However when the seeds had germinated and the plants had rapidly gained size, their relationship to the true banana became obvious.

Bruce also discussed the plant's place in the mythology of Egypt and pointed out that on some of the Egyptian statues carvings depict the goddess Isis sitting among the leaves of what was thought to be a banana tree, a plant native to Southeast Asia and not known in Ancient Egypt.^{[7][8]}

Sir John Kirk felt that in habit *Ensete livingstonianum* is indistinguishable from *E. ventricosum* and noted that both are found in the mountains of equatorial Africa.

Known variants and hybrids

- *Ensete ventricosum* 'Atropurpureum'
- *Ensete ventricosum* 'Green Stripe'
- Red false banana (*Ensete ventricosum* 'Maurelii', syn. *Musa maurelii*)
- *Ensete ventricosum* 'Montbeliardii'
- *Ensete ventricosum* 'Tandarra Red' (syn. *Musa* 'Tandarra Red')
- *Ensete ventricosum* 'Red Stripe' (syn. *Musa* 'Red Stripe')
- *Ensete ventricosum* 'Rubra' (syn. *Musa ensete* 'Rubra')

References

- [1] Richard Pankhurst, *Economic History of Ethiopia* (Addis Ababa: Haile Selassie I University, 1968), p. 194. Pankhurst uses the taxononym *Musa ensete*.
- [2] Jerónimo Lobo, *The Itinerário of Jerónimo Lobo*, translated by Donald M. Lockhart (London: Hakluyt Society, 1984), pp. 245f
- [3] Kippie Kanshie, T. "Five thousand years", p. 38
- [4] Kippie Kanshie, T. "Five thousand years of sustainability? A case study on Gedeo land use" (<http://www.treemail.nl/download/treebook5.pdf>) (PhD dissertation: May 2002), p. 19
- [5] "Enset as staple food not valuable anymore to bridge food gap", *Focus on Ethiopia*, April 2003 (<http://www.ocha-eth.org/Archive/2003ArchiveFOE.htm>), UN-OCHA-Ethiopia (accessed 3 March 2009)
- [6] Plant Resources of Tropical Africa ([http://database.prota.org/PROTAhtml/Ensete ventricosum_En.htm](http://database.prota.org/PROTAhtml/Ensete%20ventricosum_En.htm))
- [7] *Curtis's Botanical Magazine* vol. 87 (1861)
- [8] Encyclopaedia Britannica ([http://books.google.co.za/books?id=cThTAAAYAAJ&pg=PA469&lpg=PA469&dq=Maitsha+Ethiopia&source=bl&ots=ZY5-pU7-SQ&sig=6NOWqrkgNCBSnEC-JHmr5iUHwBA&hl=en&sa=X&ei=AN5wT6GHHKP80QX8zOSOAg&sqi=2&ved=0CCUQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=Maitsha Ethiopia&f=false](http://books.google.co.za/books?id=cThTAAAYAAJ&pg=PA469&lpg=PA469&dq=Maitsha+Ethiopia&source=bl&ots=ZY5-pU7-SQ&sig=6NOWqrkgNCBSnEC-JHmr5iUHwBA&hl=en&sa=X&ei=AN5wT6GHHKP80QX8zOSOAg&sqi=2&ved=0CCUQ6AEwAA#v=onepage&q=Maitsha%20Ethiopia&f=false))

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