

**LEVEL: MIDDLE GRADES**

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CENTRAL AMERICA C-20

CATEGORY: CENTRAL AMERICA: NOW

CONCEPTS: AGRICULTURE, economics, geography, transportation, U.S./Latin American relations, colonialism

ACTIVITY: BULLETIN BOARD DISPLAY: THE BANANA - FROM GUATEMALA TO YOUR TABLE. Students as well as adults often forget the work involved in providing many of the products we consume without a second thought. The banana is a clear example of this. The history of this fruit, as well as the process by which it is cultivated and distributed to U.S. homes, can be a fascinating eye-opener. In this lesson, students will study the banana in order to set up a display showing the process by which it arrives at their breakfast tables or in lunch boxes.

OBJECTIVES: Students will portray on a bulletin board or classroom walls the story of the banana. They will learn how it is cultivated, transported and distributed.

MATERIALS: Bulletin boards or wall space  
Paper and drawing or painting materials

PROCEDURE: Following is a history of the banana in the New World and a description of the process by which it is grown, harvested and distributed. Give your students this information and then assign individual students or small groups the task of portraying in drawings the different steps in the banana's history and cultivation. Hang these drawings on a bulletin board or on the wall so that students can visually follow the story. Both the history and cultivation process of the banana are given here. You can use either or both of these aspects for the display.

The History of the Banana

1. The banana probably originated in the sultry tropics of South Asia. It was known to the ancient Chinese, Greeks, and Romans. Alexander the Great found abundant bananas in the valley of the Indus River in 327 B.C.
2. The Arabs are credited with introducing them into the Holy Land and northern Egypt in the seventh century. From there they were introduced in the Canary Islands.
3. Friar Tomás de Berlanga, a Catholic priest from Spain, planted the first bananas in the Western Hemisphere. In 1516 he landed on Hispaniola (the island of Haiti and the Dominican Republic) and planted banana roots. When Friar Berlanga was made Bishop of Panama, he also introduced the fruit there. Other missionaries followed his example throughout the Caribbean.

4. For many years the banana produced a constant food supply for the people of the Caribbean, but the development of the banana trade took a long time.
5. The first word we hear about bananas in the United States comes in 1690. In that year, an unknown skipper delivered a shipment of bananas to Salem, Massachusetts. The New Englanders boiled the fruit with pork and found it disgusting.
6. By 1850 regular shipments of bananas began to arrive in New York, Philadelphia and Baltimore. Shipping was difficult because if the weather was bad, most of the fruit was overripe when it arrived. These bananas were purchased a few bunches at a time by pushcart peddlers who hawked them in the streets of the cities.
7. In 1864 Carl Franc, steward on a schooner running between New York and Panama (then part of Colombia), tried shipping bananas that were still green. He was very successful and made a tidy profit. He soon had a monopoly of the banana trade to New York.
8. In 1877, Captain Lorenzo Dow Baker, a tall and bewiskered New England skipper, took his family to Jamaica to set up a banana export business. He encouraged the Jamaicans to raise more bananas and soon Jamaica was one of the greatest banana-producing regions.
9. In 1883 Minor Keith set up the Colombia Land Company in Costa Rica. With his profits he financed a railroad in Costa Rica and set up the banana industry.
10. In 1898 the United Fruit Company was founded by the conglomeration of three companies purchased by Minor Keith. This company soon controlled most of the banana trade in Latin America and also transportation, communication and even politics of the area.
11. In the early part of the century 2 major technical advances shaped the banana industry, (a) cargo ships were refrigerated to protect the bananas and (b) telegraphs allowed for a more efficient delivery system and served to warn of adverse weather conditions at sea.
12. In 1928, Colombian banana workers went on strike for better wages and working conditions. Several hundred were massacred during a demonstration. They were shot by army forces, thus ending the strike.
13. In the 1930's a leaf blight, sigatoka, ravaged plantations in Honduras, Guatemala and Costa Rica. This disease caused a crisis in the banana industry. People in Central America and the Caribbean, who had come to depend on the banana for a livelihood, faced unemployment and hunger.

14. In the 1940's, President Ubico of Guatemala signed decree number 2.795, giving plantation owners the legal right to kill workers in order to avoid unrest and strikes.
15. In the 1950's the banana business recovered and today remains a booming business.

#### Cultivation and Distribution of the Banana

1. Banana plantations are carved out of virgin jungle lands. The land is first surveyed and then the thick undergrowth is cut down. Deep drainage ditches are dug to divert the heavy tropical rains.
2. A complete support system must be set up which includes the construction of railroads for transporting the bananas, bridges, telephone lines, and buildings for storage and for employees. After all this is done planting can begin.
3. A plantation is laid out in sections so that work can be done in an organized fashion. Each section is marked with stakes to indicate planting each 20 feet. Every three to four months workers must clean out the underbrush.
4. Banana rootstocks, which have buds similar to the eyes of a potato, are planted about a foot deep in the ground. They grow very quickly and within 3-4 weeks shoots begin to grow. Only the stronger shoots are allowed to grow; workers cut the others off.
5. Banana plants reach maturity in about 14 months. They stand about 15-30 feet high. It is not really a tree as most people think, but rather a tall, fibrous plant.
6. When the plant is about 10 months old a large flower bud appears at the center of the leaf cluster. The length of its stem increases slowly and the bud bends downward. In 3-4 months the bud opens, exposing clusters of flowers, pointing downwards.
7. Each cluster of flowers develops into a "hand" of bananas, composed of 10-20 "fingers." As time passes, the bananas grow plump and large, and turn upward. At maturity a stem bears 70-200 bananas and weighs from 60-90 pounds.
8. The same root stock produces a second stalk about the time the first stalk is ready to harvest. In this way, the plant continues to produce fruit.
9. Bananas must be cut during a three day period when they are at a certain stage of maturity. They are cut green because if they ripen on the plant they lose their flavor and their skins burst open.



10. Teams of two plantation workers cut bananas. A broad, flat knife, fitted to the end of a long pole, is used to cut down the stalks. One worker only slightly cuts the stalk a few feet below the bunch. In this way, the weight of the fruit causes the plant to bend over slowly and the second man can catch it on his shoulders. This avoids the danger of the fruit crashing to the ground and becoming bruised.
11. The workers place the harvested bananas in basket-like containers which fit onto a mule or in a cart. They are taken to one of the railroad spurs which dot the plantation and connect with the main railroads which transport the fruit to the shipping center.
12. Before being loaded aboard ship, banana bunches are dipped into vats containing antiseptic solutions. This kills any insects. A fungicide mixture is also painted at the end of each stalk, to prevent the growth of bacteria which would cause rotting.
13. Bananas are loaded onto the ships on large conveyor belts. Only one bunch of bananas is put into each of the canvas pockets of the belt, which moves continuously over the side of the ship and down into the hold.
14. In the hold, workers carefully store the stems, butt end down, in air-conditioned wooden bins. Large ventilators keep the cool air circulating around each bunch. The temperature must remain at about 57° F. during the entire voyage.
15. Bananas are unloaded very carefully on conveyor belts. Inspectors check the bunches for overripeness or bruising, and keep count of the accepted bunches.
16. The fruit is loaded into refrigerated freight cars or trucks and transported to warehouses all over the U.S.
17. In the local warehouses, the bananas are kept in warm ripening rooms for 3-4 days.
18. When ripe, the bananas are delivered in smaller clusters to retailers. U.S. families purchase them and take them home to enjoy for breakfast, lunch, dinner or snacks.

(Note: The history of banana cultivation in Central America and the Caribbean is complex and full of contradictions and violence. Depending on one's perspective, it is seen either as a major pioneering effort to bring prosperity to the area, or as systematic exploitation of Latin American land and people. We have included indications of the reasons for both views in our brief history. It is important for students to have a rounded view and to consider both the pros and cons of the banana industry:

- a. Bananas, of many different types, provide a major food staple for large sectors of the population in Central America and the Caribbean.
- b. The development of the industry led to improved systems of transportation and communication.
- c. The banana has provided an important export crop for these nations.
- d. The conversion of these economies to monoculture economies (which depend on only one crop) meant extreme vulnerability to the whole nation. Any fall in international banana prices, any plague or bad weather caused the economy to collapse.
- e. Large plantations and conglomerate banana companies removed ownership of the land from the people who lived in these nations. Instead of being able to grow food needed for a balanced diet, these countries had to import food at very high prices.
- f. It is unfortunate but historically true that the large banana companies controlled almost every aspect of life in these countries, at times becoming almost "de facto" governments (hence the term "banana republic"). Attempts to curtail this control or to improve the conditions of the agricultural workers were often met with extreme violence.

VOCABULARY: monopoly, monoculture, conglomerate, sigatoka (leaf blight), plantation agriculture, conveyor belts, ripening rooms, retailer, banana republic.

SOURCES: General Secretariat, Organization of American States, Bananas, Washington, D.C.: 1971 (good description of production but ignores the negative side of banana monoculture). Eduardo Galeano, The Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of Pillage of a Continent, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973 (as evident from the title, a harsh indictment of the banana industry as well as coffee, sugar, mining, etc.). Two novels which deal with "banana barons" are John Dos Passos' The 42nd Parallel and Miguel Angel Asturias' The Green Pope.

