best bought green or just turning yellow, then permitted to ripen at home. Ripened on the plant itself, the flavor is said to become insipid. Not only that, the fruit cracks open, permitting insects to enter a previously clean environment and spoil it.

Back in the 1940s, Miss Chiquita Banana sang her virtues to the listening public. She warned that bananas should never, but never, be stored in a refrigerator, for they would turn brown—an ugly brown. Never mind the color of the skin! The flesh still looks and tastes the same. Besides, you can delay softening and spoilage. They are more likely to spoil if exposed to heat and humidity.

In trying to lose weight, you may have shunned bananas, thinking they will add fat. If so, you may change your thinking gears. They are 92% high quality carbohydrate and less than 3% fat. If you have hypertension and must minimize sodium intake and elevate potassium, this fruit is ideal. One banana will give you 750 mg. of potassium, 60 mg of thiamin (B) 76 mg. of riboflavin, and only 0.6 mg. sodium, to list four most significant nutrients.

Many people like variety in their selection of fruits. We welcome seasons when other fruits become available, for we want a change. Bananas, however, are one fruit that most people can eat the year around and not grow weary of them. Ask for bananas in any market in any large city, small town, or village in America, and more than likely you can purchase some. This was not always so. Supposedly, the first bananas to enter this country (only about 18 stems or bunches), were brought from Cuba to New York in Captain Chester’s schooner, in 1804.

So now you know that bananas not only taste good, they are good for you. You can now also call them by their other name: “The fruit of the Wise Men.”
The Portuguese so valued the banana as food that, in 1482, they transported rootstock with their slave shipments from Guinea to the Canary Islands. From the islands, a missionary priest, Fria Tomas de Berlanga, introduced the plant to Santo Domingo in Hispaniola in the Western Hemisphere, in 1516. Soon Mexico, then all countries in the American tropics, grew the plant.

Later explorers, seeing the plenitude of the banana in the New World, thought it to be a native there. Yet no name for banana, or ancient records describing the fruit, has been found. Consequently, the American tropics cannot claim the banana as indigenous to the land. All evidence still points to southern Asia as its homeland.

No doubt, the Spanish explorers who found “bananas” in the New World referred to the plantain, Musa paradisiacal, also of the Musaceae family. They look like giant green bananas, but you would find them unpalatable, should you bite into their starchy flesh. But baked, fried, or cooked, even you might agree that they are delicious. At least, natives of the area where they grow eat these “cooking bananas” with gusto, but as a vegetable, not as a fruit.

Of the hundreds of varieties of bananas that grow in the tropics, we receive very few different kinds in this country. Several varieties, indigenous to certain tropical countries, yield inferior fruits. An Ethiopian variety, M. ensente, is grown for the juicy petiole, or leafstalk. Its fruit is discarded. Some species of the Musaceae family are useful, not for eating, but for fiber. Manila Hemp (Pusa textilis) is an example. Good quality rope and fabrics are made of this banana relative. Manila folders were once made from this fiber, but now from wood pulp, thus inferior in quality. Still other species are raised for their ornamental qualities.

Though the Caribbean and Central American countries are now the world’s greatest exporters of commercial bananas, Africa can claim the distinction of being the biggest producer. But the Africans consume nine-tenths of their crops.

While we often call these huge, herbaceous plants, “trees,” you can cut through the trunk with a machete in two or three whacks. What tree, eight to ten inches in diameter, can you fell like that? Instead of the trunk being woody, it consists of 12 to 24 overlapping layers of leaves, or leaf-sheaths, in a compact mass before they unfurl into leaves.

The banana is probably the largest plant that does not have a woody stem above ground. Dig into the ground and you will find the subterranean stem, or root-stock, called a rhizome. You won’t find woody roots or a taproot. It does sprout an aggregation of cord-like roots, each about a quarter-inch in diameter, running horizontally in all directions, just under the surface for up to 15 feet. Other roots descend vertically several feet. These, of course, divide into rootlets and root hairs, which absorb water and minerals from the soil. The absorbed nutrients travel up vein-like channels to the main plant above ground.

Like the potato, the rhizome has “eyes” or buds, from which new plants grow. Within three or four weeks after being set into the ground they shoot up through the surface. The most prolific of food plants, the banana plant grows rapidly. Within a year it has grown to a height of 15 to 30 feet, depending on soil conditions. At ground level, it has a diameter of between 9 and 16 inches.

Only one flower stem pushes its way up between the center of the leaf bases to emerge through the middle of the crown of leaves. As it enlarges, the weight of the bud on the end causes it to hand down. The flowers grow in clusters spirally arranged.

The clusters appear in groups of six to twelve, which later develop into “hands,” the fingers eventually pointing toward the sky. Three to four months later, after harvesting, the plant dies and is cut down to make room for a new plant to grow from the same rhizome.

Each plant grows only one bunch of bananas and each of these has from six to nine clusters or “hands.” Each hand averages about ten bananas. A bunch of less than six hands is not marketable. A nine-hand bunch weighs between 50 and 65 pounds.

Botanically, the banana is an elongated berry, the remnants of seeds appearing as black specks in the center of the pulp. Fifteen to sixteen months after planting, the fruit is ready for harvesting. It is picked green to enable the fruit to withstand transportation and still arrive green at the wholesalers’ warehouse. To attain maximum flavor, bananas are