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BANANA BLISS



While the coconut tree has earned its reputation as the 'tree of a thousand uses' due to its versatility, I would argue that the banana plant can be considered its botanical counterpart. There are many parts of the banana tree that can be used from the fruit, blossom, leaves, and stem.

The banana fruit can be eaten fresh or cooked. It can be fried into banana fritters and cekodok, turned into various Malay kuihs (lepat, lempeng, bingka, apam and talam) or baked (banana cake). It can be processed for various downstream products such as banana chips (kerepek pisang) and smoked banana (pisang salai). This fruit is suitable for desserts such as banana split ice-cream and shakes too. Young banana fruit can be curried into gulai pisang tumis darat.

The banana blossom, known as "jantung" in Malay for its heart-like shape, undergoes a blanching process in hot water before serving as a condiment with a rice dish, typically enjoyed as an ulam (leaves, vegetables or fruits consumed either raw or blanched, paired with the zesty kick of sambal belacan). Beyond its role as a condiment, the banana blossom can be transformed into a delightful kerabu, a Malay vegetable salad with dressings from lime juice, dry toasted grated coconut (kerisik) and shrimp paste.

Banana leaves play a crucial role in Malay culinary traditions, serving as versatile wrappers

and food linings for nasi lemak, leman, otak-otak and ikan bakar (grilled fish). These leaves add a distinctive touch, enhancing both presentation and flavour. Other than that, banana leaves are essential for wrapping a variety of kuihs, including lepat, kuih koci, tepung bungkus, pulut dakap and lopes.

The tender inner tissue found in the central part of the banana stem, referred to as "umbut" in Malay, is made into a dish called gulai batang pisang, a delicacy reserved for wedding celebrations in villages of Kedah. Banana stems, when finely chopped, serve as nutritious fodder for livestock, offering a sustainable and cost-effective dietary option.

Banana fruit, leaves, blossoms and stems are different from type to type. To a common eye, all banana varieties may seem alike, but only to those who know the difference know that it is not. Banana varieties exhibit distinct characteristics in their fruit, leaves, blossoms and stems, often imperceptible to the untrained eye. Casual observers may perceive them as similar, those knowledgeable about these differences

appreciate their unique attributes. For instance, pisang berangan is delectable on its own. Pisang abu is ideal for banana fritters, pisang emas is perfect for cekodok. Pisang nangka makes good banana chips and the leaves of pisang hutan are excellent for lining in leman making. While pisang embun blossom makes good ulam as it is not bitter. While the inner stem of pisang awak makes delicious gulai umbut pisang.

Given its versatile uses, bananas are deemed an ideal addition to home gardens. Widely regarded as a staple in kampongs, its cultivation merits inclusion in urban areas as well. Bananas, being one of the most consumed fruits in Malaysia, serve as an abundant source of vitamins, cost-effectiveness, and ease of cultivation. Notably, banana plants require a one-time planting effort, after which they regenerate and continue to grow on their own. Considering these benefits, shouldn't the inclusion of banana plants be deemed a 'must' for every home garden?

