

Now that it's been a couple weeks since Halloween, most of us have eaten the good candy out of whatever remained from trick-or-treaters. So we are down to the mini bags of candy corn, wax bottles, and banana flavored taffy. No offense meant if those are your favorites, but they were at the top of the polls for least favorite Halloween candy. The banana flavored taffy seems to be very polarizing, people either love it or hate it. I wonder if it is because it doesn't taste like the bananas that we know and love. There are actually a couple reasons for this. The first is that back when banana flavoring was created, the process for creating flavoring was not as sophisticated as it is today. The second reason, and the one I'll be looking at for this column, is that the flavor is actually based on a completely different type of banana than the kind that we know and love.

When we go to a grocery store today and buy bananas, there aren't different varieties like there are apples. Most of the time, there is one variety of banana, and it is called the Cavendish banana. Before we can talk about why there is a lack of choices in bananas, let's talk about some botany first. Bananas are not planted by seed like most crops. This is because bananas have been bred to be sterile. The black bits that are in the middle of the bananas are actually what would've become the seeds if bananas weren't sterile. When they need to produce new banana plants, they separate the rhizomes, the underground stem that puts out shoots. It is the same concept as when iris plants take over an area, and have to be dug up and separated out because the roots have multiplied. Or when aloe vera plants produce pups. This method of propagating bananas means that over time, the genetic variation that would come from bananas producing by seeds decreases. These bananas that have all been created from using rhizomes are all genetically identical.

In some ways, this is a good thing. All of the banana plants should respond the same way and be ready to harvest around the same time because they have the same genetics and have been exposed to the same environmental conditions. However, it also means that if one banana plant is susceptible to a disease, they are all susceptible to the same disease.

Back in the late 1800's, the banana of choice for production was the Gros Michel, or the Big Mike banana. It was so popular that the industry became a monoculture, where they really didn't grow other varieties. Imagine if Nebraska grew corn and only corn. You might see why this is problematic. Around the 1950's, a deadly fungus called Panama disease started infecting banana plantations. Like I said earlier, if one plant is susceptible to it, then all of the ones that have been propagated from the same plant are also susceptible. Panama disease wiped out the Big Mike banana, forcing producers to switch to the Cavendish banana, which is much more resistant to Panama disease. Unfortunately, in the 1990's a new strain of the disease appeared and has started to affect the Cavendish bananas. There is hope though, researchers are working on ways to solve this with better information and technology than what was available in the 1950's.

Banana flavoring is actually based off of the much more strongly flavored Gros Michel banana, which is why banana flavored candy doesn't taste much like the bananas that we are familiar with. However, the Gros Michel banana was wiped out by Panama disease in the 1950's. If you have any questions or would like to suggest a topic for me to write about, feel free to contact me at the Buffalo County Extension Office, at 308-236-1235, or mearnest2@unl.edu.