

# 🔍 Bananas from farm to fruit bowl



## **Banana Sourcing: we eat an awful lot of bananas – more than 5.2 million tonnes in Europe last year!**

As demand for Europe's favourite fruit continues to increase, more and more countries are growing and exporting bananas. Today, Fyffes works with growers in many different countries including the Windward Islands, Belize, Costa Rica, Colombia, Panama, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Ivory Coast, Honduras, Cameroon, Brazil and Peru.

Fyffes owns or leases 6,000 hectares of land [that's about 9000 football pitches!] in Central and South America, but the majority of our fruit is sourced through our long term partnerships with independent growers or grower groups. Fyffes has spent over 100 years finding the best growers and building strong relationships with them. This enables growers to benefit from longer term agreements and pre-agreed prices and it enables Fyffes to invest in quality and support. It's about confidence and sustainable supply. We work with our grower partners to internationally recognised codes of practice that focus on worker welfare and environmental sustainability. We are a major supplier of organic produce and the biggest supplier of Fairtrade bananas into Europe.

**Growing: growing the best fruit takes time – more than 12 months in fact. (And did you know that bananas really don't grow on trees – the banana is actually a giant herb!)** Tiny cuttings are taken from a "mother plant" and these are then potted up in the nursery. Once big enough, they are planted out in the field where they can grow to 6 metres in height over the next 9 months. Then the plant blossoms and baby bananas appear. At first they look like tiny (straight!) fingers, but as they grow they fill out and turn upwards, seeking the sun (this is called "phototropism"). They curve around the bananas above them and this gives them their distinctive shape! From blossom to harvest takes about 3 months. As the bananas appear a special plastic cover is wrapped around the fruit to protect it from the wind and insects. It also creates a perfect micro-climate to help the fruit grow and stay healthy.

**Harvesting: the bananas are harvested when they are green (if the fruit is left to ripen on the plant it can spoil the taste).** Harvesting the bananas while they are still firm and green also allows them to be packed and transported without damage.

Each plant produces a single large bunch or stem carrying 100 -200 bananas. The fruit is only harvested when it's ready, expert 'cutters' select the fruit according to maturity, quality and the thickness of the fingers. After it is cut from the plant, each large bunch is lowered gently onto the padded shoulder of a porter, who carries it a short distance to a cableway. Banana production is still a people business – machines might damage the delicate fruit. Foam cushions are inserted between the 'hands' to protect the fruit and prevent it from getting marked during its journey by overhead cableway to the pack house – the cableway is a bit like a ski lift for bananas!

**Inspection & packing:** This process is a race against time because the bananas start to ripen as soon as they are cut from the plant. They are immediately sorted, washed and packed [all by hand] into protective boxes or trays, ready for the voyage to Europe. Fruit going to Europe will need to be kept fresh for up to 2 weeks.

Despite the need for speed the bananas must be handled with great care. Even the slightest pressure can cause brown, unsightly spots on the sensitive skin. Those bunches which meet Fyffes specifications are cut from the stem and placed into the first wash tank. After washing and further inspection, the distinctive symbol of quality - the Fyffes blue label - is applied by hand to bananas that meet the standard. [NB the other bananas aren't wasted, it's just that not all the fruit gets the Fyffes label.] Packing the clusters into the carton is a specialized job - the fruit must be packed tightly enough so it won't move around in transit (which would cause scarring and bruising) but not so tight that the fruit will mark.

**The long journey:** The journey to Europe takes two weeks and even though the fruit is harvested whilst still green it would be over ripe by journey's end. So, for the voyage to Europe Fyffes bananas are carried in temperature controlled containers. A temperature of 13C is just cool enough to slow down the ripening (the bananas go into a sort of hibernation) but not so cold that the bananas will catch a chill.

**Ripening:** Upon arrival in Europe the still green bananas are transferred to special banana ripening centres where experts carry out the next quality check. The fruit is placed in a ripening chamber where the temperature can be gently controlled according to a ripening programme written by the head

ripeners. Every batch is unique and the ripening process is designed to suit the particular characteristics of the fruit and the date it is needed by the retailer.

To encourage all 300,000 bananas in the chamber to ripen at the same rate, a tiny amount of ethylene vapour is released into the airflow. This is a naturally occurring vapour normally given off by the bananas themselves – it “wakes them up” from their hibernation. Under the expert eye of the ripener, the starches within the banana begin to change into sugars and the firm, green bananas ripen into soft, creamy yellow treats.

Most of the time the fruit is delivered to the retailers a little bit under ripe, so that it will be just perfect when it reaches the store. Retailers can specify a particular skin colour based upon a Fyffes colour chart. We can even do mixed bags of green and yellow fruit – some to eat now and some to eat later.