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- HOME
- EDITORIALS
- NEWS
- FEATURES
- OPINIONS
- REGIONAL GATEWAYS
- DOSSIERS
- LETTERS TO THE EDITOR
- BOOK REVIEWS
- ANNOUNCEMENTS
- EVENTS
- JOBS
- GRANTS
- LINKS

- E-GUIDE TO SCIENCE COMMUNICATION
- ENGLISH
- ESPAÑOL
- PORTUGUÊS

- WHAT'S NEW?
- ENGLISH
- ESPAÑOL
- FRANÇAIS
- 中文

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: enter search :

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NEWS

Back to news

Print Format

Email Article

Comment

Researchers from tropics to give bananas big chill

Mike Shanahan
18 October 2005
Source: SciDev.Net

Efforts to conserve the genetic diversity of bananas — economically the world's fourth most important crop — have been boosted by the creation of an international centre for research and training.



Banana varieties

The centre at the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium was set up under an agreement signed today (18 October) by the university and the International Plant Genetic Resources Institute (IPGRI).

The agreement recognises the university's expertise in freezing plant material without damaging it — a technique it will pass on to researchers from developing countries, says IPGRI spokesperson Jeremy Cherfas.

For 20 years, the university has hosted the world's largest collection of bananas — with samples today of some 1175 varieties. Scientists can use this resource to develop bananas with traits desired by both farmers and consumers.

Bananas are a major crop throughout the developing world. But conserving the genetic diversity of different varieties is difficult because most are seedless and reproduce by sprouting shoots directly off a parent plant.

This means that samples of these varieties cannot be stored in conventional seed banks.

Scientists from the University of Leuven have overcome this problem by freezing parts of the banana plant in a way that does not damage them.

Under the agreement signed today, scientists from developing nations will be trained in this and other techniques for conserving the genetic diversity of important crops.

The need to preserve different types of banana was highlighted in the 1950s when the main commercial banana variety, Gros Michel, was wiped out by a fungal disease. As a result, it was replaced by the Cavendish variety, which could resist the disease.

Cavendish is now under threat in Asia from a new strain of the fungus that wiped out Gros Michel, while another deadly fungal disease, known as Black Sigatoka, has spread from Asia to the Americas and Africa.

A comprehensive collection of banana varieties should help researchers adapt strains such as Cavendish to the threat of pests and disease or improve their nutritional value.

"We need the diversity to breed better bananas," says the network's director, Richard Markham. "And we need better bananas to meet the needs of the smallholders who depend on banana and plantain for their staple diet and most of their income."

REGIONAL GATEWAYS



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The newly created centre will also conserve and research other important tropical crops such as taro and cassava that, like bananas, can reproduce without producing seeds.

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