

**WELSH JOINT EDUCATION COMMITTEE**  
**General Certificate of Secondary Education**



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# We're all going bananas

Sales of bananas have reached an all-time high, eclipsing the simple British apple in our affections. **Robin McKie** reports on the soaring popularity of this country's favourite, life-enhancing fruit.

**BRITAIN HAS GONE** bananas. Over the past 12 months we have consumed an unprecedented 3.5 billion pieces of fruit, forcing our native apple into a poor second place.

The banana is healthy, the ideal snack food if fitness is a priority. It is packed with energy, fibre and vitamins. It is rich in potassium and low in calories. And eating two bananas provides enough energy for a strenuous 90-minute workout. Sportsmen like Tiger Woods and the entire Manchester United team, who eat banana and jam sandwiches before games, rely on the fruit to maintain their sporting prowess.

The nation's banana boom is one of the most remarkable of recent years, a guide not just to the impact of healthy-eating campaigns but also to the country's economic health.

We spend more money on bananas than any other supermarket item apart from petrol and lottery tickets, and more than 95 per cent of our households buy them every week. Bananas are us, it seems.

The addiction will be reinforced this month as TV viewers watch endless Wimbledon shots of tennis players munching their way through hundreds of bananas, a fruit now considered necessary for recovery between sets and rallies.

Yet a century ago hardly anyone in Britain had tasted or even seen a banana. Early attempts to bring them to Britain met with failure because by the time they had been picked, packaged and then shipped, they had rotted beyond recognition. The development of refrigerated shipping

changed everything, with the first shipment arriving 100 years ago this month, triggering a national love affair from which we have never looked back.

A striking measure of the banana's popularity can be seen in trade figures that show sales in the UK have rocketed by more than 150 per cent since 1985, while fruit sales in general have risen by a mere 15 per cent. Last year alone there was a 9 per cent growth in British banana sales.

"The banana has everything going for it, so its popularity should not seem that surprising," said Lyndsey Morgan of the fruit's marketing organisation, the Banana Group.

"It is easy to open and is a high-energy food. It is also a first class hangover cure, stabilises blood pressure and soothes heartburn. And when you want to start weaning babies, mashed banana is the perfect food. You can even use the skins as garden fertiliser when you have finished. It is astonishingly versatile."

Bananas are seen as a symbol of economic strength because countries that buy them in the largest quantities are always wealthy nations, like Britain. However, there is a downside to the banana's popularity. As campaign groups like Fairtrade point out, banana plantation workers are usually very poorly paid. Many live in

miserable housing in near-starvation and are left sterile by the use of chemicals in banana production.

As a result, some supermarkets such as Sainsbury's now offer Fairtrade bananas which have been bought directly from the growers, who are guaranteed realistic prices for their products. Such schemes are already helping farmers in Costa Rica, Ghana, and St Vincent. Some 10,000 tonnes of Fairtrade bananas were sold in Britain last year, but this represents only a fraction of our supermarket sales. Last year 725,000 tonnes were sold in Britain.

Crucially, increasing numbers of these bananas are being specially packaged – for example, in kids' packs, using smaller fruit, or in 'Eat Me/Keep Me' bags in which fruit at different stages of ripeness is sold to help once-a-week shoppers.

It is this kind of aggressive marketing that has helped keep the banana at the forefront of British shopping and command a place in virtually every household.

Annual consumption now stands at the equivalent of two bananas a week for every man, woman and child in the British Isles, an annual trade now valued at more than £600 million.