

You are viewing one of thousands of biographies – click below for more, including Search box and access to Plant associated organisations.

[Plant Biographies](#)

[Bibliography](#)

Ananas comosus

[Synonyms : *Ananas ananas*, *Ananas paraguayensis*, *Ananas porteanus*, *Ananas sativus*, *Ananassa sativa*, *Bromelia ananas*, *Bromelia comosa*]

PINEAPPLE is an evergreen biennial or perennial. Native to tropical South America (particularly Brazil, and Colombia) it has a head of small flowers that ultimately combine to form a large pine-cone-like fruit.

It is also known as *Ananas* (Finnish, French, German, Gujarati, Marathi, Swedish), *Ananasovník chocholatý* (Czech), *Ananas pain de sucre* (Creole), *Ananás pestovaný* (Slovak), *Ananasso ordinario* (Italian), *Ananaz* (Portuguese), *Anannas* (Hindi), *Anannasa* (Sanskrit), *Anaras* (Bengali), *Anaspandu* (Telugu), *Annanas* (Malayalam), *Annaasipalam* (Tamil), *Annasi* (Singhalese), *Bo lo* (Chinese), *Danas* (Sundanese), *Fichtenapfel* (German), *Hala kahiki* (Hawaiian), *Kapa-tsiaka* (Chinese), *Mainabu* (Kikuyu), *Ma-khanat* (Thai), *Nanas* (Javanese and Malay), *Pina*, *Piña* (Spanish), *Pine*, and *Sappa-rot* (Thai); and in flower language is said to be a symbol of perfection, and ‘you are perfect’.

The flowers are pollinated by birds.

Warning – unripe fruit can have a violent purgative effect. Prolonged contact with the juice can cause dermatitis.

Comosus means ‘tufted’ with reference to the leaf-like bracts on top of the fruit.

Archaeologists have found designs with a pineapple motif on Peruvian pottery. Pineapple was a familiar fruit from the wild for American Indians from Paraguay up through Middle America and the West Indian islands and had been in cultivation long before the Europeans set eyes on it. (They beheld seedless fruit and botanists ponder the fact that the plant must have been long dependent upon man for its reproduction for it to have given up seeding itself.) In the Caribbean on the one hand the Indian tribes surrounded their villages with hedges of pineapple plants (the arching pointed, sharp-edged and usually spiny grey-green leaves would be unpleasant to force an entry through) – and on the other they crowned their hut entrances with the fruit (or hung the fruit from the lintel) as a symbol of welcome. The fruit were used in tribal rituals, were eaten at feasts, and were introduced and traded far afield as the marine tribes in particular explored, raided, and migrated. It was also used to make wine.

On his second voyage west Christopher Columbus ((1451-1506) the Genoese explorer, landed in Guadeloupe in 1493 and he and his men were the first Europeans to see and taste pineapples. Twelve years later the fruit were introduced to St. Helena and it may have arrived on African shores by 1550 at the hands of the Portuguese slavers. By at least 1548 they were being grown in the Dutch East Indies and in India. [A story is told of how Jesuit priests presented the Mughul emperor, Akbar the Great (1542-1605) with a gift of a pineapple in the hope of pleasing him.] By 1558 the plant had reached the Philippines, and they were being cultivated in China by 1594 (how they reached there is open to debate – possibly across the Pacific from Peru, or around Africa and via the Philippines from tropical America). But it was not until 1838 that Lutheran missionaries took the fruit from India to Australia. As regards North America pineapple appears to have been as much a ‘foreign fruit’ among most of the populace as it was in Europe (although there are records which suggest that the Seminole Indians in southern Florida did recognise the

plant as a source of food) until the mid-19th Century and the advent of suitable rapid marine transportation.

Meanwhile in the late 1530s the first European (according to some authorities) to give an accurate description was a Spanish historian named Gonzalez Hernandez de Oviedo y Valdes (1478-1557). He compared the plant to a thistle and said of the fruit that it was in taste, one of the best fruits in the world and that the flavour was a combination of melons (*Cucumis*), strawberries (*Potentilla*), raspberries (*Rubus idaeus*) and apples (*Malus*)‘(at that time the latter were called ‘pippins’).

In France 1576 saw the beginning of Huguenot persecution. Some of the French Protestants fled to the Netherlands and by about 1589 the capital, Amsterdam (with other Dutch towns) was generally recognized as the refugee haven of Europe as religious tolerance was offered there regardless of persuasion. One French Huguenot who ended up at Leiden invented a hot-house for plants and as a result of this at the end of the 16th Century the Dutch were the first to grow pineapples in Europe.

In the following century when King Louis XIV (1638-1715) received the first pineapple to be cultivated in France he bit into the fruit, unpeeled, and cut his lip badly. This experience dissuaded him from further experimentation with the strange fruit and it was left to his successor to bestow French royal favour in 1733. In fact Louis XV (1710-1774) so enjoyed pineapple that a special hot-house was built to accommodate them, and from the mid-18th Century the pineapple received fashionable approval in his realm.

Across the Channel in Britain the pineapple, initially often referred to there (and among the English-speaking settlers in North America) as a ‘pine’, was accepted much faster. (It may have first reached there from Brazil as early as 1555.) Charles I, who ruled from 1625-1649, much enjoyed the fruit that was presented to him in 1642 as a product of the hot-house of the then Duchess of Cleveland. He gave the noted diarist, John Evelyn (1620-1706) the chance to taste them and Evelyn, although at the time doubtful about the high claims that had been made for the pineapple’s flavour, did conclude it has yet a graceful acidity, but tastes more like the quince and melon than of any other.

But Charles I himself was so impressed by the fruit that he sat for a portrait with the first pineapple that had been raised by Rose, his gardener. The pineapple’s increasing popularity in the Country did not falter and by the early 1700s it was not only fashionable among wealthy British gentry to grow pineapples under glass but also the height of convention to use the fruit as models for garden statuary. At Richmond in Surrey Sir Matthew Decker’s gardener, Henry Tellende, is said to be credited in 1714 with growing the first enjoyable pineapple in England, and 10,000 were produced for the then Duke of Portland by William Speechley who published a book on his methods in 1779. Perhaps though the passion for both the cultivation of the fruit and its replication in garden and architectural design during this period is displayed best by the one storey pavilion built in Stirlingshire for the fourth Earl of Dunmore (c.1730-1809) in 1761. The Earl served for a time as Governor of Virginia (USA) and following his sudden return to Scotland in 1777 the pavilion acquired its unconventional dome. The entire roof of the circular central chamber was sculpted in the shape of the top half of a huge pineapple. [Since that time the building has gained a further storey and is now owned by the National Trust for Scotland, who in 1973 leased it to The Landmark Trust. Referred to as ‘The Pineapple’, this latter body restored it to its former glory and now maintains it as one of the historic buildings on its holiday letting list. A fascinating footnote to this is provided by the Landmark Trust’s history of the building in which a Virginian tradition of the late 1700s is mentioned. Apparently sailors placed a pineapple on the entrance post to signify their

arrival home.] No doubt it was this overall early enthusiasm that led to the English, nay British, being the first to develop commercially both seedless and larger fruited varieties, and these varieties are the ones that were to provide the basis for the modern pineapple industry when they were re-introduced to more natural climates.

The fruit were expensive in Europe. They were costly to cultivate there and as yet suitable, rapid transportation from more conducive climates did not exist. Thus despite the interest and fashionable approval displayed by 'high society' they maintained their rarity. This may well be the reason that none of the early European cookery books would appear to include the pineapple among its ingredients. It is believed that the first one to do so was *The French Chef* published in London in 1813 and written by the Earl of Sefton's French chef, Louis Eustache Ude (one of many then heading English kitchens) who later moved to Crockford's Gaming Club.

Meanwhile on the other side of the Atlantic society hostesses in the English colonies on the Atlantic Seaboard were polishing their status in their rivalry over the presentation of the most exotic and sumptuous dinner table. For this apparently the pineapple was king. Although the distance from the Caribbean (for those living in the Southern States) was insignificant compared with that for an Atlantic crossing to Europe it was still a difficult journey for the fragile pineapple. The wooden ships of that period were neither extremely fast nor were they insulated against the heat and humidity. Thus the sight of a whole pineapple (that might well have been rented for the occasion before it was sold on to somebody else) on one of these dinner tables was an indication of great resourcefulness, standing, – and wealth. There were also those well-off but more gentle souls of course who went to great trouble and expense to include pineapple on their menu as a welcome to their guests and a genuine display of appreciation of their company. In addition pineapples manifested themselves in the form of carvings, and designs on carpets, materials and furniture as in their homeland.

It was not until the 1870s that fresh pineapples were successfully crossing the Atlantic by ship from the West Indies. In the 1840s large harvests were common in south-eastern Asia as well (often reaching glut proportions) but as alluded to earlier their perishability did not lend them to transportation over long distances. In the late 19th Century however canneries were established and canned pineapples started to be available (as well as the fresh fruit) in less hospitable climes. Today with air transport fresh pineapples are flown into Europe from places as far afield as say Hawaii, the most important commercial producer at the turn of the 20th and 21st Centuries.

Although it seems to be uncertain how or when the pineapple first appeared in Hawaii authorities record that a Spaniard, Don Francisco de Paula y Marin (1774-1837) who arrived in Hawaii in about 1793 was the first white man to plant it there in 1823. (There are those who believe that it was being grown there as early as 1813.) The crops were not particularly successful until the end of that Century following the establishment of the Islands' first pineapple plantation in 1885 by an English horticulturist, Captain John Kidwell. The pineapple Hawaii exports today was developed over a long period – in the same way that other fruit and vegetables have been improved over decades, if not centuries in some cases. Apparently the modern plants bear little resemblance to their introduced forebears. Another interesting fact is that because of the importance of the pineapple to the country's economy nowadays, Hawaii has placed a ban on the importation of humming birds. (In the American tropics pineapple plants are pollinated by these birds and in several countries in this region too the ban has had to be introduced in order to try and prevent the development of seeding fruit.)

The fresh fruit are eaten both cooked and raw. They are also used commercially to make jam and other preserves, and they are an ingredient in soft and alcoholic drinks eg. *Vin*

d'Ananas.

Today their commercial cultivation (primarily for their fruit ie. for food and drink) is a major industry in hot climates and is attracting journalists' attention. It seems that in the mid-1990s the international producers were beginning to show disturbing comparisons with the worst aspects of for instance the banana industry eg. severe environmental damage, very poorly paid workforce. Recent reports regarding the activities in the Philippines of one of the large American companies that grows lines of pineapples there describe how in one large area the jungle has been cleared, the land has been flattened, the soil has been so overworked that it has been turned to dust and although it provides 60% of local employment the indigenous population has been brought to a mean quality and standard of living with extremely low wages, dependence on a dominant employer and a dust bowl for a home. At the same time it should be said there are smaller producers in that region who are growing pineapples under avenues of coconut palms (*Cocos nucifera*) but this method, although environmentally friendly, is not as economically viable in the short term. The primary reason for the aggressive cultivation is said to be competitiveness in world markets. It is contended that this has become so ferocious since the successful completion of the world GATT talks in the 1990s. (As mentioned under 'banana' (*Musa*) many people recognized before the GATT negotiations were concluded that the agreements would not be universally beneficial. It could be argued that so many people raised the spectre of trade wars if GATT was unsuccessful that nobody made much overt effort to consider the agreements' effect on multi-national corporate ventures and the possible need for agreed legislative constraints to safeguard a principle of fair as well as free trade.)

But the pineapple is not only of interest for its fruit. The leaves yield a strong, soft and fine, white fibre which in the early 18th Century for instance was being used in Malaysia for sewing thread – and several threads twisted together provided fishing lines. In south-eastern Asia (particularly in the province known today as Guangdong (originally Kwangtung) in China and in Malaysia, Indonesia, and the Philippines) cloth as fine as any made from other materials has long been hand woven from the leaf fibres of certain varieties of pineapple. But its traditional production is so labour intensive and so difficult to mechanise that attempts at commercial production have waxed and waned in different regions during the last 150 or so years. For leaf fibre the young fruit are pinched out of the plants to allow all nourishment to reach the leaves. From time to time the fibrous leaves are cut from the plant and undergo as yet laborious hand preparation to yield very fine yarn or thread. This white thread is so fine that the fastest local weavers require a day to produce 1 yard of gossamer-like fabric (known in Filipino as *piña* cloth). In the 19th Century the Chinese imported the fibre from the Malaysian area and became highly skilled at weaving it often, then, mixed with cotton. The Indonesians used to make the material into raincoats for their élite. The Philippine national costume is made from it and it is also fashioned into various garments including shawls and men's shirts. The Philippine Textile Research Institute has been trying to encourage mechanization as possible to replace the arduous and time-consuming traditional processing methods since the late 20th Century.

In contrast the strong durable fibre that can be extracted from the young leaves has also been used in South America according to some authorities to make cordage, ropes and packing materials. While in parts of Africa its white colour was of such appeal that it was used in some areas to make cord on which chieftains hung their jewellery.

Some areas in Africa are said to have subscribed to an unusual superstition. It was believed that if somebody who was sick yearned after pineapples they were close to death.

The fruit juice has been made into industrial alcohol and this when mixed with ether has

produced a fuel that has been run in car engines. Records also describe another unusual application for pineapples. It would seem that in some places ships' (wooden) decking was scrubbed clean with fine sand and a pineapple. While in Malaysia the juice has been used in etching the blades of the traditional daggers, the *kris*.

Jamaica holds the oldest British colonial arms and on the Cross of St. George it displays five pineapples.

Medicinally, the Guarani Indians of Brazil and Paraguay have used juice from the ripe fruit to enhance digestion and the healing of wounds, and also as a remedy for stomach upsets. Some African and Asian regions have used unripe fruit in the treatment of venereal disease, and fed juice from the roasted fruit to children and invalids. In Europe herbalists have used the fruit to treat painful corns, various skin ailments and some side effects of diphtheria. The flesh and/or decoctions of the tough skins have featured in many slimming programmes. Recent research suggests that a particular enzyme found in the stems (and the leaves and fruit) could play an important role in the treatment of thrombosis.