

Passiflora mollissima

[Synonyms : *Passiflora tarminiana*, *Passiflora tomentosa*, *Passiflora tomentosa* var. *mollissima*, *Tacsonia mollissima*]

BANANA PASSION FLOWER is an evergreen climbing vine. Native to tropical America (especially the South American Andes, western Bolivia, western Venezuela, Colombia, and south-eastern Peru) it has green and deep pink flowers with white-tipped purple filaments.

It is also known as Bananadilla, Banana passion fruit, Banana poka, *Curuba* (Bolivian, Brazilian, German), *Curuba de castilla* (Spanish), Pink banana passionfruit, Softleaf passionflower, Sweet calabash, *Tacso* (French, Spanish), *Tacsonia*, and *Tumbo* (Bolivian, Peruvian, Spanish).

The flowers are pollinated by humming birds.

Mollissima is Latin (soft) meaning ‘very soft’.

Authorities suspect that banana passion flower was only domesticated shortly before the first Europeans set foot on South American soil in the early 16th Century.

The fruit have long been sold in local South American markets. The fruit juice is made into drinks (including various sherbets and a refreshing one known as *Crema de caruba*). The strained pulp is eaten raw and used in ice creams and mousses, as well as in pies, fruit salads and preserves such as relishes and jams.

The leathery-skinned, downy, yellowish-white fruit are also enjoyed by birds and animals which disperse the seeds.

Today the vine is cultivated widely for its fruit and also as an ornamental, particularly in Colombia and Ecuador – and further afield such as Australia and New Zealand where, unlike in some of its other adopted homes, it is grown outside instead of in a greenhouse.

Like some closely related species banana passion flower can be highly invasive. In New Zealand it is now banned for propagation, sale or distribution as it is proving to be a problem. Authorities there believe that indigenous blackbirds and opossums are the main dispersal offenders and it is apparent already that in various places the vine has begun to fill in gaps in forest. In Hawaii this alien plant has invaded gaps in upland forest here too, aided and abetted in this instance by birds and wild pigs which feed on the fruit and spread the seeds. This has led on one of the islands at least to unusually innovative control methods in an attempt to relieve native habitat. They grow passion fruit commercially on Kauai and there is concern that any biological controls applied to banana passion flower could harm the related commercial crop. The alternative to such controls would be physical removal of the offending vine – but in addition to its vigour the plant has already swamped large areas. So a new event on the Island has emerged – an annual Banana Poka Festival in May. During this people are shown how to pull the vines from the trees and then how to weave the stems into baskets. The United States is not immune either as it has been declared a noxious weed there.