

Foods in the Forests



Rainforests offer a veritable bounty of foods. Of an estimated 75,000 edible plants found in nature, only 150 enter world commerce and only 20, (mostly domesticated cereals), stand between human society and starvation. This means that modern agriculture is vulnerable to pests, disease and changes in climate.

Genes from wild plants are used to fortify modern varieties, and are likely to become increasingly important for this purpose. In the 1920's, when disease decimated the sugar cane crop in South America, genes from a wild species in Java saved the industry from ruin. In 1970, wild coffee from Ethiopia's vanishing forests saved Latin America's plantations from devastation. Every modern rice plant contains a gene resistant to grassy stunt virus, a major rice disease. The gene was discovered 25 years ago in just two seeds from Indian forests. No other seeds containing the resistant gene were ever found again.

Tomato varieties have been improved by crossbreeding with wild tomatoes from Ecuador, Chile and Peru. Similar crossbreeding has improved other varieties of fruits and vegetables.

In the tropics, there are wild trees that yield 650 pounds of oil-rich seeds a year, a fruit with more vitamin C than oranges, a palm with more vitamin A than spinach and another palm whose seeds contain 27% protein. There is a palm whose seed oil is indistinguishable from olive oil and a tree producing resin which can be used unprocessed to run a diesel engine.

There are shrubs with fruit containing compounds 300 times sweeter than sucrose, some with leaves coated in industrial grade waxes, seeds used for dyes and plants producing insecticides. There are also plants that yield twine for weaving baskets, furniture and often even beautiful and elaborate cladding for the homes of forest dwelling people.

Crops originating in the rainforests include rice, quinine, rubber, coffee, bananas, eggplants, lemons, oranges, tea, cacao, cashews, cassava, tapioca, peanuts, pineapples, guavas, brazil nuts, paw paws, avocados and many more.