



Did you know?



Going bananas from staying at home, are you?

Are you “going bananas” from staying at home these days due to the precautions against the spread of the coronavirus? Well, many folks here in our parish in Venezuela don’t even have to leave home to get a nice delicious banana. They grow their own bananas right there in their yards.

The climate of Minnesota is excellent for growing apples, strawberries, raspberries, blueberries, plums, and pears, but, given the hot climate in this part of Venezuela, none of those fruits will grow here. However, if you like mangoes, papaya and lemons, along with bananas, you are definitely in the right place. And what about chocolate and cashews, two things you may not have known grow on trees. Yup, we’ve got them here, too.

Mango trees abound in our neighborhoods. Many reach 80 ft. or higher. A big tree can produce 300 mangoes at a time. When the fruit is ripe, kids climb precariously up the tree or try to dislodge the mangoes with long poles, the same way some people in Minnesota do with apples, while others wait down below to catch them.

Papaya is just as common here. The tree doesn’t grow very tall and only lives a handful of years but just keeps producing fruit all the time, up to 80 lb. a year. Papaya is one of several plants that have a white milky sap called latex from which a wide variety of products are made. The latex from commercially grown papaya is used in meat tenderizers, chewing gum, toothpaste, shampoo, and even beer. It is used as a folk remedy to treat diabetes, intestinal worms, tumors, high blood pressure and warts. Wow! Most folks don’t grow papaya for those uses, however, just for the delicious fruit.



bananas



mangoes



cacao



papaya – lechosa



milkweed



cashews

Some latex plants are found in Minnesota as well, the most common being milkweed which many people now grow as a food for monarch butterflies since it is the only food the monarch caterpillar eats. Milkweed happens to be the most common weed here in Venezuela. It is everywhere. Break a branch and see the latex, but try not to get it on your skin. Liquid latex irritates the skin. Given that the Spanish word for “milk” is “leche”, here in Venezuela papaya is more commonly called “lechosa” or “milky plant”.

Other fruit-bearing trees that grow well here are most citrus fruits, avocados, coconuts, and cashews. “Wait a second”, you might say, “cashews are nuts, not fruit.” The fruit looks more like a pear with a crescent shaped appendage at the bottom. That’s the nut. Removed from the fruit, dried and roasted...it’s a delicious cashew.

The cacao tree (think “cocoa”) can grow to about 25 feet, but people usually keep them shorter to harvest the seeds more easily. A tree typically produces around twenty pods, each containing around 40 seeds which are dried, cleaned, shelled, roasted and ground. I’ve never had hot chocolate as tasty as that served here by families made from their own cacao trees.

More than any other fruit, our people grow bananas. A banana plant, actually an herb rather than a tree, commonly reaches full height of 18 feet or higher and produces a single bunch of 25-40 lb. of bananas in just nine months! By the time the bananas are ripe, the roots have already sent up one or more new shoots which can be transplanted or left to grow where it’s at. They’re super easy to grow here, but stop growing below 57° F. (68 is about the coldest it ever gets here) which is why you’ll go bananas trying to grow them in Minnesota.

Points to ponder

Most of the foods you eat were not native to the United States but were introduced from other parts of the world. Corn originated in Mexico. Tomatoes, peppers and potatoes came from Peru, wheat from Iraq, and peaches and soybeans from China. Oats, barley, carrots, radishes, and apples were brought by European colonists as were horses, cattle, pigs, sheep, goats and chickens. Lettuce and cucumbers were brought by Christopher Columbus. Next time you go to the supermarket, thank God for foods from around the world.

The Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis has staffed and supported parishes in the diocese of Ciudad Guayana in Venezuela since 1970. These “Did you know?” papers are designed to give you a better understanding of life in Venezuela and to strengthen connections between the parishes of the Archdiocese and their archdiocesan mission during our 50th anniversary year. Please direct any comments or suggestions for future papers to Fr. Denny Dempsey at ddempsey@churchofstdominic.org or 651-368-7324.