edited by S. L. BYRAND

Reaping the Benefits of the "False Banana"

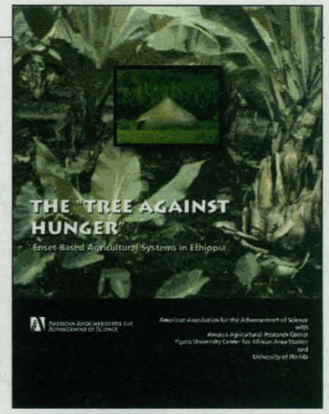
Enset, also known as the false banana, has been perhaps the least studied domesticated crop in all of Africa, but new research shows that it may provide a key resource for guarding against famine. According to a new AAAS publication, *The "Tree Against Hunger,"* enset not only is nutritious, but can be harvested at any time and stored for long periods. Moreover, enset can survive stresses that reduce other food sources, and it tends to enrich rather than deplete soil as do other crops.

Brook Lakew, an applied physicist from Ethiopia, discussed another advantage, that enset is a species native to Ethiopia. "It's very important to rely more on indigenous plants for our food supply," said Lakew, who works for Raytheon Corporation out of NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center. "Studies have shown that indigenous plants are more resistant to local diseases than imported species. A bout of crop disease could totally decimate an imported crop and increase the likelihood of famine. I believe that studies such as this one will focus people's attention not only to enset's nutritional value but also its genetic adaptation to local conditions over a long period of time."

Written by a team of scientists from Ethiopia, Japan, and the United States, *The "Tree Against Hunger"* examines the current status of enset production and investigates its potential for helping to ensure food security in a nation that has been devastated by famine. Too little rainfall had been causing catastrophic droughts since the 1970s: In 1984–85 alone, the estimates on famine-related deaths in Ethiopia ranged from 250,000 to 1 million people. Since then, relief and development efforts have focused on finding long-term, sustainable solutions for food production in Ethiopia, with some of the country's regions faring better than others. For instance, in those areas of Ethiopia where enset was grown, the residents survived the droughts at a significantly higher rate than those in areas that did not rely on enset.

This year, downpours from El Niño have had mixed consequences on Ethiopia's agriculture, according to Felix Lee of Famine Early Warning System. Some areas are benefiting from the extra rain, while others had crops washed away. The Ethiopian government is planning assessment trips to evaluate the crop situation more fully, to determine if international appeals will be necessary to make up for possible food shortages.

Despite enset's potential as a nutritious food source, it faces some obstacles, as discussed in *The "Tree Against Hunger."* Its usefulness is not widely known, even in Ethiopia. Moreover, there are some cultural barriers, with some viewing it as "peasant food." While there are those who like its taste, others find it unpalatable. Because it is lacking in protein, enset is not a complete solution, but it could serve to supplement diets, especially in emergencies. The AAAS research report is available at www.aaas.org/international/ssa/enset/index.htm or by calling John Schoneboom at 202-326-6651.



Online Help for Funding Needs

A new Internet-based clearinghouse for funding sources, GrantsNet, promises to reduce the time and effort it takes to track down grant information for life science research. The database, at www.grantsnet.org, provides details on grants and how best to get them, as well as the latest research funding news. For instance, in its "New Awards" section, GrantsNet explains the career development grants that the National Institutes of Health created in late February.

While new grant programs give scientists more opportunities to secure funding, they also add to a large pool of information that many have already found inconvenient to wade through. "GrantsNet gives scientists a much-needed edge, especially considering that funding has become both a matter of prestige and survival," said Wendy Yee, the project manager of GrantsNet at AAAS.

Launched in early March, GrantsNet is the brainchild of a partnership between AAAS's Web site for young scientists, *Science*'s Next Wave, and Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI), which has provided funding for the next 3 years. GrantsNet is still developing its database, but it expects to offer detailed information on 350 different sources of support by year's end, as well as offer insight into such questions as how to improve one's chances for selection. The latter is particularly important, says Yee, given that funding has not kept in step with the rapid growth of well-trained scientists who are vying for research dollars.

Kristen Keefe, an assistant professor in the Department of Pharmacology and Toxicology at the University of Utah, expects that GrantsNet will provide an excellent resource not only for her, but also for the four grad students she supervises. "From what I've seen so far, it will be a great way to key into information from the lab instead of having to make appointments at the Office of Sponsored Projects across campus," said Keefe. "It's user-friendly, so I can easily modify the search to suit my needs. I also like that I will automatically get e-mail updates on new funding sources." For Keefe, GrantsNet promises to leave her and her students more time to do science, investigating dopamine and glutamate interactions in the basal ganglia.

"It's a resource for which I have been waiting for more than 5 years," said Marc Paradis, a third-year graduate student at MIT. GrantsNet impressed him, he reported, not only because it can help him reach his full career potential, but because it uses the Web to its best advantage. "The kind of work that HHMI and *Science*'s Next Wave are doing on this project represents the best of what the Internet can do," said Paradis.

Focusing on Policy Issues

On 29 April through 1 May, AAAS will hold its 23rd Annual Colloquium on Science and Technology Policy in which participants examine policy issues facing the science community. The forum, which draws nearly 500 of the nation's top experts in science and technology policy, will center on the theme "R&D: Getting Our Money's Worth." Topics will include the 1999 budget proposals of R&D agencies, strategic planning for science and technology in the states, R&D in the new military, and public perceptions of science. U.S. Representative George E. Brown Jr. of the House Committee on Science will give a special address open to the public.

The Colloquium Web site (www.aaas.org/spp/dspp/rd/colloqu.htm) offers updated program information and permits online registration for the event, which will be at the Renaissance Hotel in Washington, D.C. For more information, call 202-326-6600.