Pineapple

Can a plant make meat tender?
How fashionable are clothes made from plant leaves and fibers?
And why did people build houses that looked like giant pineapples?

When Christopher Columbus brought the pineapple back to Spain in 1493, after one of his voyages of discovery to America, he could not have guessed that one day half of Europe would be crazy for pineapple fruit. The pineapple is a member of the bromeliad family, which got its name from the Swedish physician and botanist Olaf Bromel (1639–1705). The name "Nanás" comes from the Guaraní language of South America.

Pineapple flowers have a scaly structure that resembles the fruits they will later become. The striking bright red blossoms are classified as berries. Pineapple berries are so delicate that in former times they did not survive the long journey back to Europe. They could only be grown in colder countries after people developed heated greenhouses, beginning in the eighteenth century. At that time, rich people rushed to get the scrubby fruit with its sweet, juicy flesh. If you wanted to show off still more, you might even build your greenhouse in the shape of a pineapple, and those who were completely pineapple-crazy would serve tea in pineapple-shaped teapots.

Apart from all the fun and games, people also found out that the flesh of this fashionable fruit could be used to make meat tender. Scientists later found out why: a chemical called bromelain in the plant's stem breaks down and softens the structure of meat. Bromelain is a miracle substance that also helps the body convert food to energy, helps us resist germs, and is useful in the treatment of cancer and the healing of wounds.

In the Philippines, the leaves of the pineapple plant are processed to make fabric. Pineapple fibers are also being used in other countries to make sustainable clothes and vegan shoes – without the addition of substances that are harmful to the environment.

Eating pineapple helps to keep your appetite in check, and some people swear by the pineapple diet. However, it isn't really healthy to eat pineapples all day long! Enjoy the fruit in moderation. You might try Toast Hawaii, a treat made from tinned pineapple. From the end of the nineteenth century, food companies began selling pineapple in tin containers, where the fruit was preserved in its own juice. This product enabled ordinary people – those who couldn't afford to grow pineapple in a fancy greenhouse – to enjoy the fruit for themselves.

Rowan

Are the fruits of the rowan poisonous?
Can you get a drink from this tree?
Does the rowan help you sing better?

The rowan is a deciduous tree also known as the mountain ash or the dogberry. It is widely found in Europe, right up into the high mountainous areas. The tree's small red fruits, which are often mistakenly called "berries," were once used by hunters to attract birds, which is why the Romans gave it the name *aucuparia*. The word consists of 'au' (from *avis* = 'the bird') and 'cuparia' (*capere* = 'to catch'). Pigs especially like eating the rowan's apple-shaped fruits.

In fact, the tree attracts beasts of all kinds: 31 species of mammals and 72 species of insects like to eat its fruits, leaves, shoots and buds. People, however, should avoid eating the fruits while they are still raw – you might get a little stomach ache if you do. But if you cook them, you can make a delicious jam that also contains large amounts of vitamin C. In former times, stewed rowan fruits were a valuable source of vitamins in winter. Some people even used them to make schnapps, an alcoholic drink, but that sort of thing is not as good for you. Rowan fruits are also popular in herbal medicine. They help relieve stomach problems, haemorrhoids, rheumatism and gout. You can also use them to make a sugar substitute for patients suffering from diabetes.

Rowan trees have been popular for other reasons, too. The wood of the rowan is strong with an attractive grain, and carpenters have used it to make furniture and wooden carts. Even the bark of the tree has its uses. When you simmer the bark, the cooking liquid can serve as a red dye for woolen clothing. Singers and public speakers have prized the liquid in which rowan fruits are cooked because it was said to remove the coating on their vocal cords and make their voice clearer.

A tree as useful as the rowan was highly respected in former times. For the Celts it was the tree of life, and they believed that every rowan fruit they ate would lengthen their lives by one year. The tree was also said to combat the evil spells and magic powers of witches. All in all, rowans are simply fantastic plants!

Passion Flower

What does a flower have to do with the story of Jesus in the Bible?
Is there a flower that helps against stress?
Can a flower also be a tree?

The passion flower originally came from the tropical zones of South America, Australia and Oceania, because it needs a warm climate. When it was brought back to Europe during the seventeenth century, not all the varieties survived. However, the passion flower, with the Latin name *Passiflora*, has robust underground roots and can also come back to life after a frosty winter. This ability to "resurrect" itself has something to do with its common name.

Shortly after it was imported to Europe, people believed that the flower symbolized the Passion of Christ: the Biblical story of Jesus' death and resurrection. Its petals stood for Christ's Apostles (or followers), while its blood-red base recalled the wounds that Jesus received when he was killed. In fact, many old pictures of the Virgin Mary, Christ's mother, include an image of the passion flower. *Passifloras* also appeared in the sunniest spots of monastery gardens.

The passion flower is a climbing plant that can be cultivated to reach the size of a tree. Large *Passifloras* grow leaves up to 1 meter (3,3 feet) long, as well as the aromatic passion fruit with its tangy seeds and juicy flesh.

You can make an herbal tea from the petals of the passion flower, which are arranged like a sun wheel. As for the fruit, there are up to 540 varieties. Some of these varieties have a calming effect when consumed, which is supposedly good against stress, sleeplessness and asthma.

One type of passion flower, the *Passiflora caerulea*, is a mysterious plant with a disconcerting appearance. Its neat circle of petals and layers of sepals make it look almost artificial.

Artichoke

What plant did the ancient Egyptians like to eat?
Can a vegetable help keep you from farting?
And why does a flower have hair?

An artichoke is a kind of thistle plant. It can grow almost two meters (6,6 feet) tall, and when fully mature it produces an enormous purple flower head perched on a thick stalk. People who cultivate artichokes for food, however, harvest the plant before the blossoms appear. Prior to flowering, the buds have pretty rows of green bracts arranged in layers, which you can cook and eat. The artichoke heart, at the base of the flower head, looks a bit like a grayish-green cutlet and is regarded as a gourmet delicacy.

The leaves arranged around the stalk are tough and have hairs on their undersides. It's hard to imagine that these bristly things could be good for us, but they are. The bitter substances they contain are effective against bloating and flatulence, commonly known as farting. Even the ancient Egyptians knew this. They began their meals by eating the delicious artichoke hearts and then, after another five courses, they would drink a broth made from artichoke leaves so that their stomachs didn't feel so bloated.

Incidentally, artichoke hearts are the innermost bracts of the bud. They are very tender, and in warm-weather countries they are marinated in oil to make them even more delicious.

People can also cook the outer bracts, which you consume by sucking on them. Along with the heart, an artichoke plant has strange hairs at its center. It almost looks as if the plant has a punk hairstyle. This part is called the choke, and it is inedible.

Today, extracts of artichoke leaves are used in the treatment of heart disease, high cholesterol levels in the blood, and digestive problems. There is even a schnapps called Cynar. *Cynara* is the Latin name of the artichoke and is named after a Greek nymph with whom Zeus, the father of the gods, fell in love. She did not want him, however, and in revenge he turned her into an artichoke.

Do you think the hair at the center of every artichoke has something to do with Cynara?

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