What is yellow, sweet and the butt of many a joke? You guessed it — a banana. Banana Day is Sept. 12. This much-underrated fruit is readily available no matter the time of the year. It is inexpensive and versatile. It can be eaten out of hand, added to a smoothie, baked into a luscious dessert or even frozen to use later.

In honor of this humble lunchbox addition, let’s go a little bananas.

Bananas are very low in saturated fat, cholesterol and sodium. They are also a good source of dietary fiber, vitamin C, potassium and manganese and a very good source of vitamin B6.

We love bananas here in America. In fact, we eat more bananas each year than apples and grapes combined. Bananas consistently sell for about a $1 a pound in Fairbanks, which means the average banana costs about a quarter. That is a bargain for the good nutrition inside that peel.

The USDA tells us that bananas should be stored at room temperature until eaten. However, one of my readers took me to task on that statement when I wrote about storing fruits last month. He keeps his bananas in the fridge. Here’s the rest of the story. The enzymes that cause a banana to ripen are killed by cold temperatures, so if bananas are underripe, they stay that way in the refrigerator.

Once ripe, they can be stored in the refrigerator. However, the skin turns black very quickly. Since we eat with our eyes as well as our taste buds, most of us prefer a yellow banana. That’s why the USDA recommends that they be stored at room temperature. Overripe bananas can also be frozen right in the peel until you are ready to make bread, cake or muffins.

Let’s look at some unusual ways to use bananas to vary your family’s meals.
Use them to make banana bread, cake, pancakes or muffins. Recipes abound on the Internet and everyone has a favorite. Just mash them up and go to town.

Dry them. Banana chips are available from the store, but they are dipped in sugar water and some are even fried to get that nice, crisp surface before they are dried. So dry your own in the oven or the dehydrator. They should be dipped in lemon or orange juice to prevent darkening during the drying process, but other than that, they are simply dried until leathery. They have a great flavor and can be eaten out of hand.

Use them as a sweetener. If you are making a jam, mash up bananas to mix with your other fruits to add natural sugars. You won’t need as much sugar. Call your local Cooperative Extension Service office to get instructions for a no-pectin, banana-sweetened lowbush cranberry jam.

Use as a substitute for fat in baked goods. You can use mashed, overripe bananas the same way that you use applesauce to substitute for butter or shortening. Substitute bananas for up to half the fat in your favorite recipes. Replacing fat with bananas does change the consistency of the product, so start with a smaller proportion and increase gradually.

Now, back to those frozen bananas that you’ve been storing. Peel them and put them in the blender or the food processor. Add a little milk and honey for sweetness and you’ve got a great ice cream substitute that your family will love.

Bananas are economical and are highly nutritious. Be sure to eat some in honor of Banana Day.

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