ABACÁ
(Musa textilis)

enabling deployment of underutilized species
What is Abacá and where does it come from?

Abacá is a species of banana with non edible fruits, native to the Philippines. It is also grown widely in Borneo and in Sumatra. Sometimes it is referred to as “BacBac”. The plant is harvested for its fibre, called Manila hemp, which is extracted from the sheaths, the bottom part of the leaves which form the pseudo-stem. Other common names for Manila hemp include “Cebu hemp” and “Davao hemp”.
The plant’s name is sometimes spelt Abaka. It was first cultivated on a large scale in Sumatra in 1925 under the Dutch, who had observed its cultivation in the Philippines for cordage since the 1800. In British North Borneo large scale plantings began in 1930.

PROPERTIES
The fibre made from Abacá is very durable, flexible and resistant. It is relatively cheap to produce and completely biodegradable. It can be made into many hard-wearing products and has a beautiful texture when made into hats and other products.

Uses
Until the advent of the first synthetic fibres, Manila hemp was the premier material for marine ropes where its strength, lightness and water-resistance were appreciated. Today, although marine and other ropes are still important, it is mainly used in the paper making industry. Because of its relatively long staple length, strength and cellulose content, it is used in the manufacture of a range of specialized papers including tea and coffee bags, sausage casing paper, electrolytic papers, currency notes, cigarette filter papers, medical/disposal papers and some high-quality writing paper. There is also a thriving Abacá fibre handicraft industry operating in the Philippines, which exports throughout the world.
**GROWING**

At the start of the rainy season well developed suckers are transplanted in well-drained loamy soils. New leaves emerge in succession from the centre of the pseudo-stem. At first they are enrolled and gradually unfold the blades. The petiole of each new leaf is slightly staggered in relation to the previous one resulting in an upward spiral. The pseudo-stem can reach a height of more than 3 meters and the whole plant can become 6 meters tall.

**HARVESTING AND PROCESSING**

At beginning of flowering stage, the plant is cut at the basis of the pseudo-stem. Growers harvest Abacá fields every three to eight months after an initial growth period of 18-25 months for a total lifespan of up to 25 years as the rhizome continuously produces new suckers. The sheaths contain the valuable fibre, which is composed primarily of cellulose, lignin and pectin. The fiber is extracted from the leaf sheath by hand-stripping or using a stripping machine. The strips are then scraped to remove the pulp, sometimes washed and then sun-dried. The fibers can then be spun into twines or cordage.
**Contribution to social and economic development**

Out of the world’s total estimated annual production of 82,000 tons, the Philippines alone produce 67,000 tons and therefore are by far the largest producer. Over the past 40 years production has been developed in Ecuador which today produces some 14,000 tons. Production in the Philippines is based on a “smallholder” system of agriculture, with most farms being between 3 and 5 hectares in size. Abacá grows on marginal lands and requires no external inputs thus making it a suitable crop for resource-poor small scale farmers. The Ecuadorian system is more reminiscent of the African sisal industry and is essentially a large estate-based industry, although there is also a substantial smallholder co-operative movement. The traditional Abacá industry contributes to improving the livelihood of rural people and gender empowerment through providing employment opportunities not only to the farmers but also to the strippers, traders and processors.

**The exhibits on show are just few**

of many commercial products made from Abacá:

- Abacá handbags and purses
- Abacá picture frame
- Abacá slippers
- Abacá cushion cover
- Abacá shirt
- Abacá doilies

**SOME PRODUCERS / RETAILERS / DISTRIBUTORS**

- Simor Abacá Products - [www.simorAbacáproducts.com](http://www.simorAbacáproducts.com)
- Sosan Industries Inc. - [www.sosan.ph/products.htm](http://www.sosan.ph/products.htm)
- Philippines Nature Products - [www.globeasia.net](http://www.globeasia.net)
- Wigglesworth Fibres - [www.wigglesworthfibres.com](http://www.wigglesworthfibres.com)

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