

# Breadfruit is certainly a well-named tropical fruit

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Here's a question for fans of "Mutiny on the Bounty" – why was the ship "The Bounty" making the voyage from Tahiti to the West Indies in 1789?

The infamous Captain Bligh and the mutiny of his crew are probably the most memorable parts of this film (and book). However, the real stars should be the breadfruit plants (*Artocarpus altilis*) that were the reason for the voyage. The plan was to bring breadfruit plants from Tahiti to the West Indies, where they could be grown and used as an inexpensive food for slaves in the Caribbean. These plants were also the cause of the five-month delay on the island of Tahiti while the sailors collected breadfruit and grew over 1,000 plants in pots, meanwhile enjoying the easy island life.

Breadfruit has intrigued me for some time – Does it really taste like bread? What does it look like? Where can I get it? Why have I never seen one?

Amazingly, I recently found a breadfruit at the New Castle Farmer's Market in northern Delaware, for \$4. My breadfruit looked like a large greenish grapefruit, and felt

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very hard and heavy. Having brought my prize home, I then wondered how to prepare it.

On the Internet, I found a video of the indigenous preparation method, in the hot coals of an open fire in a back yard. I opted instead for the oven method – rubbing a little oil on the outside of the breadfruit, wrapping tightly in aluminum foil, and then baking for about 1½ hours until it was soft inside (soft enough to easily pierce with a skewer). As predicted, a lovely aroma of freshly baked bread wafted from the oven towards the end of the baking period.

I did cut the breadfruit in half before I baked it, just to see what was inside – I had a seedless variety. Then I put the two halves together again in order to bake it. Breadfruit can also be boiled or fried.

The taste was like a very, very, dense potato or bread. I tried it out on a few friends, and the consensus was that it didn't taste bad, but very bland and dry. If I ever come across another breadfruit, I'd like to try to prepare it in a more interesting way, but probably not fermented as is popular in Polynesia.

The National Tropical Botanical Garden has Breadfruit Cookoffs, and lists prize-winning recipes for main dishes like casseroles, curries, and breadfruit au gratin; appetizers like breadfruit chips, wonton wraps and deep fried breadfruit; and desserts like breadfruit boiled with coconut milk, sugar, vanilla and cinnamon, and also breadfruit pie.

Breadfruit is native to the South Pacific, and was so popular with the Polynesians that they distributed it all around the Pacific. This evergreen tropical tree now grows throughout Southeast Asia and most of the Pacific islands. It's a staple food in many tropical areas, but seems to be virtually unknown in North America.

Breadfruit grows on trees that are up to 85 feet tall, which begin to

bear fruit after just a few years. This is a very productive crop, with up to 200 fruits per tree per year. Another advantage is that since breadfruit is a tree, it doesn't have to be replanted every year, as do other good sources of starch like potatoes, rice, or wheat.

These are multiple fruits, with each breadfruit developing from the ovaries of numerous different flowers, which grow together into a single fruit. Both male and female flowers are on the same tree (monoecious). The wood is lightweight, and can be used to make paper, and lumber for boats.

Breadfruit is a member of the mulberry family (*Moraceae*). In the past,

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this column discussed some other more familiar members of the mulberry family, all found growing wild in Delaware: the native red mulberry (*Morus rubra*), and the non-natives white mulberry (*Morus alba*), Osage-orange (*Machura pomifera*), and paper-mulberry (*Broussonetia papyrifera*).

The outcome of the Mutiny on the Bounty story is that the Caribbean slaves apparently did not like the breadfruit; the mutineers settled on Pitcairn Island where their descendants still live; and research is now being done to make breadfruit more useful to the world, for example as a substitute for wheat flour according to a report called "Preserving the Bounty of Breadfruit".

On the campus of Delaware State University, the Claude E. Phillips Herbarium is Delaware's center for research, education, and outreach about plant identifications, locations, and uses. Call 857-6452 (Dr. Susan Yost, Herbarium Educator) to arrange a tour of the herbarium, or for more information about this article.