CRISPR might save Cavendish bananas from extinction—but would it be a long-term solution?

Supermarket shelves may still be stocked chock-full of bananas, but the industry is growing increasingly alarmed. The fungal disease [TR-4], which causes banana plants to wilt and die, has already devastated farms across Taiwan, the Philippines and Australia …. Last year it reached the big banana farms of Latin America, which export the majority of the world's bananas.

…

The race is on to find a cure for Panama disease or to breed a banana that is resistant to it. A new entrant into this effort is Tropic Biosciences, a UK-based biotech company, that is using gene editing to develop a banana that can beat the disease.

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[S]ome scientists believe that gene editing is just a quick fix but does not get to the heart of the problem. Dan Bebber, a professor of ecology at the University of Exeter, who leads a project, BananEx which is exploring the resilience of banana supply chains, says if we are to prevent agricultural pandemics like this, we will have to change the way we farm, becoming less reliant on clones and monoculture crops.

Fernando Garcia Bastida, a Wageningen university researcher who now works for KeyGene, a Dutch plant science company, would also like to see more varieties of bananas being farmed …. The problem is that none of these has so far bred to withstand long haul transport like the Cavendish.

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