

15 October 2009 06:03 UK

Banana marks seed bank milestone

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From field to freezer: the journey of a seed bank seed

Kew Gardens' Millennium Seed Bank has reached its target of collecting 10% of the world's wild plants, with seeds of a pink banana among its latest entries.

The wild forest banana, *Musa itinerans*, is a favourite of wild Asian elephants.

Seeds from the plant, which is under threat from agriculture, join more than 3.5bn already stored, as part of a massive nature conservation project.

All the seeds are kept both in their country of origin and in Kew's premises at Wakehurst Place, West Sussex.



A wild banana has been chosen as a flagship species

The 10% target was set when the Wakehurst Place facility was completed in 2000, in Kew Gardens' 250th anniversary year.

The seed bank partnership, which involves more than 120 organisations in 54 countries, is now aiming to collect and conserve a quarter of the Earth's flowering plant species by 2020.

Musa itinerans becomes the 24,200th species to be stored in underground vaults which are kept at -20C.

Arid conditions

The project has been described as an "insurance strategy" against future biodiversity losses.

The plant material is dried, cleaned and sorted, ensuring only the finest specimens make it into the giant freezers. There, the cold and arid conditions keep the seeds in pristine condition

for anywhere between a few decades to thousands of years, depending on the species.



The seeds are painstakingly cleaned and sorted

The aim is that each seed stored in the bank can be regrown, should the need arise.

The wild banana plant from China was selected as the "10% species" by the bank's international collaborators because it fulfilled a number of conservation criteria.

Janet Terry, the seed processing manager at the bank, said: "It was chosen because it is representative of what the whole project is all about - it is endemic, endangered and it is an economic species.

"And of course, everybody loves a banana."



[Bank on seeds - the world's buffer](#)

Professor Stephen Hopper, director of the Royal Botanic Gardens, told BBC News: "In the next phase, we want to secure another 15%, so by 2020 we will have a quarter of the world's seeds banked in both the country of origin and Wakehurst Place.

"And a major focus is going to be a considerable expansion in the sustainable use of seeds for human benefit."

The researchers will be focusing on food security, biodiversity loss and climate change.

Professor Hopper added: "The thing that has changed over this 10-year period is a much more acute awareness of climate change as a threatening process, as well as the many others that impact on plant life.

"And the seed bank, as an insurance strategy, is a good sensible way of keeping your options open for the future."