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# Fostering a passion for the breadfruit

*Diane Ragone is the world's leading expert*

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By Anne E. O'Malley  
Kauai People

Marooned on a tropical island? Stumped for what to fix for dinner? If you can find breadfruit, your prayers are answered, and National Tropical Botanical Garden's Dr. Diane Ragone will explain it all to you, from fruit recognition and readiness, to preparation, how to grow it, how to support it as a hunger initiative in the tropics — and more.



Dr. Diane Ragone picks breadfruit in Kahanu Garden on Maui as Arnold Lono, gardener at the site since 1988, looks on.

Jim Wiseman



photo by ANNE E. O'MALLEY Dr. Diane Ragone, head of the Breadfruit Institute headquartered at the

It's sustainable. It's green. And Ragone is the world's leading expert, heading and managing the Breadfruit Institute, the largest and most extensive breadfruit collection in the world that houses more than 120 varieties of breadfruit from throughout the Pacific region, the Seychelles, Indonesia and the Philippines.

So compelling is Ragone's fascination for the plant that she's spent more than 20 years hopping into fishing boats, outrigger canoes and puddle-jumper planes to get to 45 islands in 16 island groups in the Pacific to collect varieties of breadfruit. And she's documented that research for the world to see and use on the Internet at [www.breadfruitinstitute.org](http://www.breadfruitinstitute.org).

"People from 130 countries have visited our Web site to learn about breadfruit," says Ragone. "The main focus of my work with the collection is access. My premise has been that the purpose of conserving biodiversity is to use it."

In the main, the collection lives at the NTBG's Kahanu Garden on Maui, where, says Ragone, "It astounds me to see plants that I collected in the field as root collections and grew in the nursery that are now 60 feet tall. It's like I've taken them through the whole cycle, and what I want to do now is take them beyond the collection."

She's doing just that with the documentation she's brought to the Internet on whatever there is to know about breadfruit.

Breadfruit has it all — it's a great carbohydrate and provides fiber. It's

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You can roast, bake, broil, fry, pickle, ferment, freeze, dry and grind it into flour or starch. Ragone's personal favorite way to have it is on the Web at YouTube, where you can find it by googling "Diane Ragone's Breadfruit Nachos."

Breadfruit is also a famine food, says Ragone, and in the Marquesas, thousands of people used to peel, ferment and place mature fruit in a pit in the ground. She's learned the process herself and describes it as being a doughy, amorphous, tart paste that could last a year or more in the pit.

In fact, she says, "People have found pits 100 years old that are still viable. All this information is disappearing," continues Ragone, who celebrates her 20th anniversary with NTBG this year, although she's been associated with the garden since 1985 when they funded her first grant to collect.

Her initial intent in collecting was to conserve traditional varieties of breadfruit in the Pacific, because post World War II, people were moving away from traditional agriculture and those methods, along with varieties, were disappearing due to cultural and environmental changes such as hurricanes and drought.

"We have varieties in this collection that may go back as main varieties 1,000 years," says Ragone. "Breadfruit's been grown in the Pacific for over 3,000 years, and we have varieties in the collection that are now gone on their home islands."

A short tale. In 2004 in Tahiti, Ragone reconnected with an agricultural extension agent she'd worked with in the late 1980s and hadn't seen since. They visited a home where the owner, now deceased, had grown breadfruit varieties and kept a list of them; many were casualties of development.

Checking her own list against his — his widow had kept it — Ragone identified the varieties she'd collected and that were growing at Kahanu Garden.

Says Ragone, "The woman started crying. To her, I was preserving her husband's legacy of preserving breadfruit. That was so touching to me, and that really showed me the value of collection from a conservation perspective, and so that aspect I'm really pleased with, because that was my original intent."

Partaking in symposia; partnering with international and regional organizations to do workshop presentations and conferences; publishing books, articles and papers; and now in the process of creating a reference collection of more than 800 writings from books, journals and scientific papers about breadfruit, Ragone is creating a legacy in breadfruit that is as rich as the plant's history.

From University of Hawai'i grad student to world expert on breadfruit, Ragone reflects on the research she did for a term paper that started it all. She'd read accounts from the journal of Capt. William Bligh, who sailed the breadfruit-stocked, ill-fated HMS Bounty in 1787 and other ships' journals including material written by Sir Joseph Banks, a promoter of Capt. Bligh's journey, who sailed on HMS Endeavour with Captain Cook to Tahiti in 1769.

"I read a whole mishmash of things and I read something that said there are so many varieties of breadfruit in the Pacific and it's so important, and the varieties are disappearing and nobody really knows how many varieties of breadfruit there are and this is a crop that needs to be conserved.

"And I just — the light bulb — I just went that's what I want to do. And I made it happen, created and found the opportunities and just plugged away by hard work and perseverance and interest, and I'm still endlessly fascinated."

Read more about breadfruit at [www.breadfruit.org](http://www.breadfruit.org) or contact Ragone at [breadfruitinstitute@ntbg.org](mailto:breadfruitinstitute@ntbg.org).

National Tropical Botanical Garden. The Institute manages the largest and most extensive breadfruit collection in the world and contains more than 120 varieties from throughout the Pacific region, the Seychelles, Indonesia, and the Philippines.

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