Why are bananas dying and what are we going to do about it?

By **Megan Tatum** - 29 May 2019

In the 1950s the Gros Michel banana was wiped out by the fungus TR1. Now a new strain, TR4, is threatening to destroy the near-universal Cavendish. Will industry learn its lesson this time?

A race against time. That's how Alistair Smith, international co-ordinator at NGO Banana Link, sums up the battle against Tropical Race 4 (TR4). The devastating fungus, which chokes bananas of water and nutrients, has already ravaged crops across Asia, Africa and the Middle East, and shows no sign of slowing down.

If it reaches the Americas - from where the UK sources the bulk of its five billion-strong supply each year - we could see disruption to the supply of one of the UK's most beloved fruits, 1.1 million tonnes of which are imported each year. "And there's no scientist or politician that can reassure anybody it won't suddenly spread to the main export production area," adds Smith. It is - he reiterates - a "race against time".

The thing is, this isn't the first time the banana has faced such a threat. Rewind to the late 1950s and the export banana of choice, the Gros Michel, was all but wiped out by an earlier strain of the very same fungus. So, why is history repeating itself?

Undoubtedly disease is an inevitability of agriculture. It's why Bayer has just paid £44.5bn for 'agrochemical' producer Monsanto. But the scale of the threat posed by TR4 is a direct result of the particularly susceptible way in which we grow and trade in bananas - namely our hefty reliance on a single variety. Despite there being more than 1,000 banana species available, 99% of exported bananas, and 47% of all bananas grown globally, are Cavendish bananas.