Markku Häkkinen

Markku Häkkinen is a former sea captain who embarked on a second career as a banana specialist in the 1990s. He became one of the world's leading authorities on the taxonomy of wild bananas in the course of a career than spanned more than 20 years. In the spring of 2014, Markku Häkkinen was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. The disease forced him to give up field work, but he continued writing articles and corresponding with people from all over the world. He died on 5 December 2015 at the age of 69.

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Early life and education

Häkkinen was born in 1946 in Pyhäjärvi, central Finland. After graduating from high school, he enrolled at the Kotka Maritime Research Centre from which he graduated as a sea captain in 1975[1]. He retired ten years later. In the meantime, he had developed an interest in natural history and botany. During a visit to Thailand, he became intrigued by banana flowers on sale in a market.

Career in banana taxonomy

As a self-taught botanist with no formal academic training, he initially had difficulties getting published in scientific journals[2]. Eventually the rejections stopped coming with the result that between 2001 and 2015 he published more than 80 scientific and popular articles, including accounts of his trips to Borneo, China, Thailand and Vietnam, among other places he explored[3]. Over the years, he made 21 expeditions to document the diversity of wild species of bananas in Asia.

Häkkinen described 49 taxa (species, subspecies and varieties of Musa). He also used his knowledge of the
taxonomic literature and his familiarity with the international code of nomenclature for algae, fungi and plants[4] to clear up some of the confusion surrounding the taxonomy of bananas.

For example, whereas the rules of botanical nomenclature dictate that the first name used to describe a plant has priority over all later names, Häkkinen and his collaborator Henry Väre from the Finnish Museum of Natural History argued to defer to usage in the cases of *Musa velutina* and *Musa balbisiana*[5]. He also consulted herbarium specimens all over the world and reviewed 442 published names in the process of producing a checklist of *Musa* names[6]. He also collaborated with molecular systematists to take his taxonomic insights to a higher level, that of the sections. In 2013, Häkkinen published a revision that reduced the number of sections from 5 to 2[7].

**Awards and recognition**

In 2009, the Linnean Society of London gave Häkkinen the HH Bloomer award, the association's highest recognition for a self-taught botanist[8]. It is awarded every year to an amateur naturalist who has made an important contribution to biological knowledge. In 2015, he was honoured with a Significant Cultural Act Award from the Finnish Cultural Foundation for his years of work on the taxonomy of wild bananas[9].

He was a visiting researcher at the University of Helsinki’s Natural History Museum and the Chinese Academy of Sciences’ Xishuangbanna Tropical Botanical Garden, as well as a member of MusaNet’s Taxonomic Advisory Group. He was also a member of the International Association for Plant Taxonomy and an Emeritus Member of the Botanical Society of America[1].

Häkkinen will also be remembered through the three taxa that were named in his honour: *Musa haekkinenii*, *Musa markkui*[10] and *Musa velutina* subsp. *markkuana*[11].

**References**

2. Remembering Markku Hakkinen
3. Musalit records of articles published by Markku Hakkinen
4. International code of nomenclature for algae, fungi and plants
5. Usage trumps priority
6. Typification and check-list of Musa L. names (Musaceae) with nomenclatural notes
7. Musa sections revisited
8. The Linnean Society honours Markku Hakkinen
10. Musa markkui (Musaceae), a new species from Arunachal Pradesh, India
11. Musa velutina subsp. markkuana (Musaceae): a new subspecies from northeastern India

**Related content**

Remembering Markku Hakkinen in InfoMus@’s Under the peel blog (23 December 2015)
The Linnean Society honours Markku Hakkinen in InfoMus@’s News & analysis (19 January 2010)

**Further reading**
