

Growing up in Virginia, Diane Ragone always knew she wanted to live someplace warm. Letters from a friend serving in the Peace Corps in the Philippines made dreams of a tropical locale even more enticing. However, it was a job in the Midwest that most likely set her on the path that would lead to her life's work. She spent part of 1978 in Chicago, during a winter which is still one of the coldest and snowiest on record for the Windy City. Then and there, Ragone decided to search for a job in a more hospitable climate. She found work as a gardener on a private estate on Kauai, Hawaii. Hawaii had added appeal—her brother in the Navy was stationed there.

Ragone, who had received a bachelor of science in horticulture from Virginia Tech, earned a master's degree and a Ph.D. in the discipline from the University of Hawaii. Upon moving to the islands, she knew nothing about breadfruit (*Artocarpus altilis*), but she decided to do her thesis on this important plant of the Pacific. She has now spent more than 25 years studying breadfruit, mostly while working for the National Tropical Botanical Garden (NTBG). She has visited 50 different islands in her work, helping to amass the world's largest collection of breadfruit trees. More than 260 trees of 120 different varieties now grow at the NTBG's Kahanu Garden in Hana, Maui. In 2003, the NTBG created the Breadfruit Institute to promote conservation and the use of breadfruit for food and reforestation, making Ragone its director.

But what exactly is breadfruit? A staple in the Pacific, it is comparable to the potato in the American diet. Ragone says it can be prepared in a multitude of ways: mashed, boiled, steamed, fried, roasted, pickled, fermented, frozen, dried and even ground into flour or starch. Its flavor changes with its degree of ripeness and how it is prepared. Raw, ripe fruits are sweet.

Interestingly, Ragone shares something in common with Captain William Bligh and Fletcher Christian, of the British ship *Bounty*. They voyaged to the Pacific to secure trees for introduction to Great Britain's Caribbean colonies. Upon reaching Tahiti, they found out how difficult it is to propagate these trees—which made their stay on the island longer than anticipated, and, well, you likely know the rest of that story!


Once a breadfruit tree is established, it proves itself as a reliable, productive food source, supplying highly nutritious food for a minimum of input. Breadfruit trees grow easily in a wide range of conditions and need little to no care to produce fruit. Trees begin to yield around 100 fruits a year at an early age; larger trees can bear 400 to 600

fruits. Ragone will be the first to tell you that more than 80 percent of the world's hungry live in tropical and subtropical regions. Breadfruit makes sense as part of the solution to their needs.

Ragone represents the Breadfruit Institute as a member of the Alliance to End Hunger, a coalition to create real change for starving people. In partnership with Cultivaris LLC, three Samoan breadfruit varieties are now being

bred through in-vitro propagation and distributed globally. This project aims to alleviate hunger, provide long-term food security and enhance the livelihoods of Pacific farmers.

When asked what she would most want people to know about her, Ragone said that she is not afraid to take chances, is adventurous, is a really hard worker but has fun. One hopes that this petite, soft-spoken woman may be remembered as someone who helped bring about the end to world hunger as we currently know it.

For more information about the National Tropical Botanical Garden and the Breadfruit Institute, see <http://ntbg.org>. 

Diane Ragone Ending Hunger

by MARIA ZAMPINI ~ photograph by JIM WISEMAN

