

I am no longer amused by fruit. Over the past few years there's been an unreported subtle change in what had long been a simple, inexpensive and reliable (though seasonal) form of entertainment.

Let's start with navel oranges. Rarely is it possible to remove the entire peel in one perfect strip with your fingers. (Only a rank amateur would use a knife.) The spiral can be admired for its plain geometric simplicity, or it can be bounced from your hand like a spring for hours of fun. Well, OK, minutes of fun. Now, even the most deft handling leaves you with several small pieces of rind coming off like shingles in a hurricane. Even then there's always a small part that refuses to come off without the use of brute force.

Brute force must be applied to bananas, too. Not long ago a gentle tug was all that was needed to remove the peel in a few complete strips the length of the fruit--perfect for tossing on the floor and creating employment for a lawyer who specializes in slip and fall cases. But bananas have become resistant to neat peeling. After much pulling and pulling, a wafer-thin fibrous strip eventually comes off. As the struggle turns fierce what's ultimately left is a sorry mess of fibrous strips and a handful of mush.

Few things are as enjoyable as biting into a cold slice of watermelon on a hot summer day to see who can spit the seeds the farthest. Alas, watermelons with seeds have been replaced by those without seeds. Frankly, there is something

surreal about seedless watermelons. I have the gnawing suspicion they've been treated with plutonium, and we'll soon hear about radiation poisoning among scores of watermelon eaters. (Seedless grapes don't bother me.) (They just don't. I don't know why.)

The problem with fruit doesn't stop there. The fun is gone from coconuts that now open ^{too} easily with a few light taps of a hammer instead of with dynamite. Using peach pits for batting practice is out because peaches split in half, pit and all, after only a couple of bites. Mangoes without their skin, once a satisfying challenge because they were as slippery as a wet bar of soap, are now too easy to handle because they're dry and sold so underripe. And who knows what's going on with kumquats, persimmons and pawpaws?

Perhaps these troubles stem from sneaky genetic engineering. More likely the problem rests with greedy growers palming off unripened fruit to make a quick buck on gotta-have-it-now consumers. Regardless, I will find other ways to entertain myself. Rest assured it will not be with the notorious durian. Although the exotic Asian fruit is described as tasty and sweet, it is also so foul-smelling that it can peel the paint off cars for thirty blocks around. Wait: I may have found a new amusement.

The End