

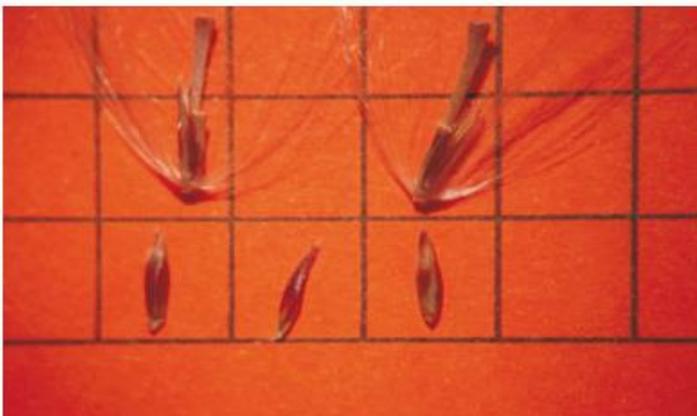
Sugar cane – vegetable or fruit???

We must first ask what is the definition of a fruit or a vegetable. Ahhhh, herein lies a problem. It seems that there are many definitions of what a fruit or vegetable is. But primarily the definitions center around **use** or **plant characteristics**.

A chef's definition of a fruit is a food that is meant to be eaten as a dessert, the taste is sweet and consumed at the end of a meal or as an enjoyable snack. All other consumed plant parts are considered vegetable. Most plants that are not eaten for their sweetness are considered a vegetable. Take for instance the tomato, we use it in salads and sauces. It's taste is considered savory not sweet. Although I've tasted some pretty sweet tomatoes. But it is most often considered a vegetable. The same can be said for squash, pumpkin, pepper, and egg plant.

A botanist's definition has more to do with the characteristics of a plant's seed. For instance, a fruit is a structure in which the seed is totally encased by a substance or layers of substances that protects the seed and promotes the distribution of the seed. This structure encasing the seed is called an ovary. The substances around the seed are usually sweet but not always (i.e. squash). The sweet taste of a fruit is thought to help with seeds' distribution and therefore specie's survival. As a result of the seed being distributed somewhere other than where it originated gives the species a chance for increased plant numbers. There are many forms of fruit, single seed fruit such as avocado and a peach, multiple seed fruit such as pears and apples, and modifications of multiple seed fruit such as strawberries. These are all examples of sweet fruit but don't forget the tomato, squash, and eggplant which are often called vegetables but from a botanist's point of view are really fruit.

Now what about sugar cane, we know that sugar cane like corn is a grass. The seed is not encased by a fleshy ovary and so it is a vegetable – even though the plant is used primarily for its sweetness.



Sugarcane seeds are very tiny, less than 1 mm long. They form on the tall, plumelike flower heads at the tops of sugarcane stems.

FIGURE 1. Batch of pure seed of *Saccharum* spp.