

Banana Plants Add Tropical Accent to Landscape

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PHOTOS BY **William M. Johnson**

Banana trees are a common feature in local landscapes. They are primarily grown for the tropical look they bring with their enormous leaves waving in the summer breezes. In addition to their large, attractive foliage, banana trees produce flowers in April, May or June on a long, pendulous stalk with distinctive dusky purple bracts.

Most calls I receive as a horticulturist concern some type of plant problem or problems including diseases, insect pests, nutrient deficiencies, etc. It's a change of pace to get calls on why a plant is doing a very desirable and splendid thing—like bananas producing a bumper crop of exotic and edible fruit.

Many homeowners enjoy the tropical accent banana plants add to the home landscape. When growing conditions are favorable,

banana plants will bear edible fruit. But first, some basics on banana culture in general.

Bananas are very easy to grow in clay or sandy soil with good drainage. Bananas need to be planted in a spot that receives direct sun. Additionally, these are large plants that require plenty of room to spread.

You may need to irrigate during periods of prolonged drought but bananas tend to be resilient. The growth rate is general-

ly rapid without fertilization but a light application of a nitrogen fertilizer on a monthly basis from spring through mid-summer will ensure good growth.

The banana found in the supermarkets is primarily the "Grande Naine" cultivar. It is mainly an Ecuadoran import. This latest of cultivars has replaced the "Cavendish" and "Gros Michel," both of which held sway over the world's banana industry for many years. The latter two culti-

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vars are highly susceptible to Panama and sigatoka diseases and as such have been replaced by the former. The new "Grande Naine" cultivar is considerably more resistant to the traditional banana diseases but it too can succumb if grown in areas with large banana populations.

There are numerous varieties of bananas that can be grown in local landscapes that will provide a striking tropical accent. For residential production, however, the cultivar "Goldfinger" is probably superior to the commercial "Grande Naine." "Goldfinger" is an excellent eating fruit and is more resistant to common banana diseases. This garden cultivar was developed in Honduras. "Lady Finger" is another recommended cultivar which grows tall (20 to 25 feet), has excellent-quality fruit, and is tolerant of cool conditions.

Banana plants are very rapid growers and are easily established. Bananas are propagated by suckers, which are profusely produced at the base of well-developed plants. In selecting suckers for transplanting, select ones with 3-to-4 inch diameter trunks for maximum success.

Producing a banana crop is certainly a source of both pride and amazement to those unfamiliar with banana culture. While getting the plants to grow is easy, producing a banana crop is rather the exception than the rule. Should an extended hard freeze occur during the winter months, the existing top growth of unprotected bananas may freeze back to ground level.

Depending on the cultivar grown, it takes at least 14 to 16 months of

favorable growing weather to produce ripe bananas. The bananas we buy at the grocery store are grown in the tropics where they have a year-round growing season.

The trick to large banana plants with ripe fruit is to begin in the spring with a plant 6 to 8 feet tall. Even though it may sound odd to discuss freeze injury to plants at this time of year, you should be aware the trunk of a banana plant must be protected from freezing back to ground level in the event of a harsh winter cold snap. The exceptional mild temperatures over 2015-16 winter season will certainly increase the probability of locally grown banana trees producing fruit this year.

While bananas may produce flowers at any time of the year, the majority of flowers are typically produced in April, May and June. The flowers are quite distinctive and are produced on a long, pendulous stalk with dusky purple bracts. The first clusters of flowers are female and they develop into the fruit. This occurs without pollination and the fruit are seedless. The clusters of fruit are called hands. A number of hands form on each stalk, and all together they are called a bunch.

Once the bunch is set, the flowering stalk will continue to bloom and lengthen, but only male flowers are produced and no more bananas will form. You may allow the flower stalk to grow or cut it off just below the bunch of developing bananas.

Bananas will generally take four to six months for fruit to reach full size after flowering, depending on temperature, variety, moisture and culture practices. There is normally a slight yellow tint to the fruit as it

reaches maturity. The color change may be so slight that it is hard to see.

Once the upper layer of fruits begins to turn yellow, cut off the entire fruiting stem. You can hang the stem, with its attached fruits, in a cool, dry place to ripen. The fruits seem to develop their flavor better when removed from the plant before ripening.

Once a banana tree flowers and its fruit has been harvested, you may cut it down to the ground to make room for new, productive trees to grow up from the creeping underground stem. Each individual tree will only flower and bear fruit once. Banana trees are as much a part of the tropical look of many local landscapes as palms. We are really fortunate to live in one of the few places in the United States where, with proper care and mild winters, these beautiful plants will also produce delicious fruit.

While you should not expect to produce a crop large enough to depress banana prices on the world market, the challenge of producing your own backyard bananas can be satisfying and tasty.

