

Banana Plants Produced a Bumper Crop of Fruit this Year

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office



PHOTO BY Dr. William M. Johnson

Most calls that I receive as a horticulturist concern some type of plant problem or problems—diseases, insect pests, soil fertility problems, 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 that banana plants add to the home garden or landscape. When growing conditions are favorable, banana plants will bear edible fruit and this certainly has been a banner season for producing bananas. But first, some basics on banana culture in general.

There are numerous varieties of bananas that can be grown in local landscapes that will provide a striking tropical

accent. 'Goldfinger' is an excellent eating fruit and resistant to several 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. I am growing a variety called 'Ice Cream' which is reported to average 15 feet in height and to be cold tolerant. The fruit is reported to have the texture and flavor of vanilla ice cream.

Don't expect your bananas to look or taste like the ones you get at the grocery store. Similar to other homegrown fruit, homegrown bananas are very flavorful but run the gamut of tastes, tangs, and textures. One reason why homegrown

bananas are so flavorful is because they have a chance to ripen naturally on the plant, which is something commercial growers don't have the luxury of doing.

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. However, smaller and larger size suckers can also be successfully established.

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 fairly easy, producing a banana crop is rather the



December 19, 2012



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News column printed in the Galveston Daily News, The Post, and other Galveston County Newspapers.



exception than the rule. Should an extended hard freeze occur during the winter season, the existing top growth of unprotected bananas will freeze back to ground level and never become mature enough to bear fruit.

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. Our last winter season was an exceptional mild one. As a result, banana trees did not suffer any significant freeze damage and home growers did not need to provide any special cold weather protection measures. Thus, many plants have gained the size and maturity required to produce ripe bananas.

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.

There are two ways to protect the banana trunk during a winter cold snap. Should a hard freeze be forecasted, the most common method used by gardeners is to wrap the trunk. Wrap each trunk with several thicknesses of newspaper or blankets using duct tape or string to keep the layers in place.

Cover the newspaper or blankets with a heavy duty sheet of polyethylene to keep them dry. Then tape or tie the plastic cover securely. Add several inches of mulch around the base of plants to guard against trunks being freeze-damaged near the soil line. This method of protection should enable your banana trunk to withstand brief periods of cold temperatures down to 15 degrees.

A second method used by some gardeners

is to dig up the plants you have grown and place them in a protected spot which is not subjected to freezing temperatures. A garage is ideal. Cut the tops back and wrap the small root system with burlap to prevent excessive drying out. Several banana trunks can be stacked one on top of the other.

If you try the first method, remove all wrapping in the spring after the danger of frost is passed. If you use the second method, replant the trunks in the garden or landscape in the spring, after the danger of frost is over. In either case, provide adequate fertilizer and plenty of water during dry spells.

The flowers produced by mature plants are rather interesting and unusual. The fruit stem normally requires 3 to 4 months to mature following its appearance. Once the upper fruits begin to turn yellow, cut off the entire fruiting stem. You can hang the stem, with its attached fruits, in a warm, lighted area to ripen.

After fruiting, the mother plant which bore should be cut off near ground level as it cannot produce again. Also, be aware that plants do not need protection against an occasional light frost which may burn leaves.

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.

