

Banana Plants Producing Bumper Crop

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PHOTO CREDIT: William M. Johnson

Many homeowners enjoy the tropical accent that banana plants add to the home garden or landscape. Local gardeners are often surprised to see clusters of fruits on their homegrown banana trees.

Most calls that I receive concern some type of plant problem or problems including diseases, insect pests, nutrient deficiencies, etc. It's a change of pace to receive calls on why a plant is doing a very desirable and splendid thing — like banana plants 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. But first, some basics on banana culture in general.

The banana cultivar primarily found in the super-

markets is known Grande Naine. It is mainly an Ecuadoran import. Grande Naine has replaced the Cavendish and Gros Michel cultivars, both of which held sway over the world's banana industry for many years in addition to being devastated by two fungal diseases.



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 superior in taste to the Grande Naine. Goldfinger is an excellent eating fruit and is more resistant to common banana diseases. Lady Finger is another recommended cultivar which grows tall (20 to 25 feet), has excellent-quality fruit, and is more tolerant of cool weather.

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.

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 will freeze back to ground level.

The bananas we buy at the grocery store are grown in the tropics where they have a year-round growing season. Bananas growing in many local landscapes produced fruits this year because of last winter's relatively mild temperatures.

While the brief cold fronts damaged many leaves, the main growing point did not suffer freeze damage. Depending on the cultivar

grown, it takes at least 14 to 16 months of favorable growing weather 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. An area of a garage near a heated

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wall 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. After pollination takes place, the fruit requires 3 to 4 months to mature. 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 cool, dry place to ripen. The remaining fruits develop their flavor better when removed from the plant before ripening.

