

Banana Plants Add Tropical Accent

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PHOTO CREDIT: Kevin Lancon

While producing a crop of bananas is a plus, home gardeners also enjoy the tropical accent that banana plants add to the home landscape.

Last fall, Kevin Lancon, a good friend as well as a Master Gardener volunteer, asked me what I thought about a banana cultivar known as 'Ice Cream.' Kevin wanted to know if 'Ice Cream' banana would really perform as well as I have claimed it would.

He explained that his bed of 'Ice Cream' bananas

had been growing for a while but had not yet produced any fruits. I advised him to be patient and continue to provide good care of his banana plants.

Producing a crop of bananas is not an undertaking for the impatient gardener. Kevin stayed the course and on Tuesday of last week (July 7) at 7:47 p.m., I smiled as I saw an incom-

ing text from Kevin that contained a photo of an impressive crop of bananas. Kevin's text message stated "Well, I got my first bushel of 'Ice Cream' bananas!"

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When growing conditions are favorable, banana plants will bear edible fruit. But first, some basics on banana culture in general.

There are several varieties of bananas that can be grown in local landscapes that will provide a striking tropical accent. For residential production, '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 when day time have been near 100 degrees, 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 mild temperatures over the past winter season have certainly increased 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 on the United States where, with proper care and mild winters, these beautiful plants also will 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.

