

Banana Plants Add Tropical Accent to Landscape

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office



PHOTO BY William M. Johnson

Many homeowners enjoy the tropical accent that banana plants add to the home garden or landscape. Despite last winter's cold temperatures, several local gardeners have reported that their banana trees have started producing fruits.

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 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. But first, some basics on banana culture in general.

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 cultivars 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been replaced by the former.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



July 23 2014



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

“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.

However, smaller and larger size suckers can also be successfully established. Some gardeners trim the lower leaves and cut the trunk back to 18-24 inches from the soil line. Container-grown banana plants are simply transplanted without trimming or heading back. 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.

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. While last winter’s temperatures were colder than normal, temperatures did not stay below freezing long enough to inflict major damage to well-established banana plants.

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 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. 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 cool, dry place to ripen. The fruits seem to develop their flavor better when removed from the plant before ripening.

After fruiting, the stalk which bore fruit should be cut off near ground level as it will not 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.

