



BANANA

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INTRODUCTION

Bananas will grow and fruit regularly in the colder regions of the lower south (Zones 8b and 9). It takes two things to be successful: a variety that will fruit in 9 months (most take 2 years) and plenty of water and fertilizer. Bananas are ferocious feeders of nitrogen and potassium. All bananas are self-pollinating.

USES IN THE LANDSCAPE

The broad, flat leaves of the banana stand out in the landscape. Plant them in clumps of three to five for a sunny tropical look. They thrive in low wet spots or on the edges of ponds. Add ginger lilies and sago palms for a jungle of your own.

Bananas have a very shallow root system and dwarf varieties are suitable for containers. Put them in large planters around the pool or out on the patio.

PLANTING AND CULTURE

SITE SELECTION

Bananas are not picky about soils and thrive in low wet spots. They will grow more vigorously and produce more fruit in full sun. Avoid frost pockets - the longer the growing season, the more tree ripened fruit you will have.

SOIL PREPARATION AND PLANTING

Bananas are VERY heavy feeders. The secret for happy, healthy bananas is in the planting hole. You can't feed a banana too much - this is one plant that needs all the organic matter that it can get.

Dig a planting hole approximately 3 feet wide and 4 feet deep (Yes, you read that right!). Enrich the planting hole with a mix of any kind of organic matter: aged mushroom compost, aged manure, kitchen scraps (no meat or oils!), leaves, and/or rotted pine bark mixed with soil dug from the hole (50:50 mix). Aged mushroom compost or aged manure added to the planting hole or used as mulch is the **VERY BEST** amendment for bananas.

Remove the banana from the pot, gently loosen the root ball and place in the planting hole. The banana should be planted **at or slightly above** the same level at which it grew in its pot. Fill the planting hole with the mix of soil and organic matter; gently tamp it in. Water thoroughly to settle the roots and eliminate air pockets. **Do fertilize** at the time of planting at the rate of $\frac{1}{2}$ cup of organic, balanced fertilizer with micronutrients per hole (Espoma makes a good organic fertilizer). Mix thoroughly into the compost/soil mixture.

If desired, construct a water basin around the base of the banana approximately 36 inches in diameter. Maintain a layer of mulch approximately 10-12 inches deep; use whatever organic matter you have. Aged mushroom compost and aged manure are excellent for bananas.

Spacing for bananas depends upon the desired use in the landscape. For individual clumps space 6-8 feet apart. Bananas will form clumps over time, and may be divided as new suckers are formed. All bananas are self-pollinating, so different varieties may be planted as desired in the landscape.

FERTILIZATION

For first year banana plants, fertilize in February, May and July with 2 cups of an organic, balanced fertilizer with micronutrients per plant. Espoma makes good organic fertilizers and their Flower Tone (3-4-5) is great for bananas. For established bananas fertilize in February with the organic fertilizer (Flower Tone) and then every month with 2 cups of 20-0-50 per plant until first frost. A 20-0-50 fertilizer is needed to promote growth and fruiting. Our recipe for 20-0-50 is:

1 part Urea Ammonium Nitrate

3 parts Murate of Potash

WATER

Water thoroughly at least 2-3 times a week. Soak the entire root system deeply - this usually takes 40-50 minutes. Bananas need plenty of water to look their best and produce fruit. Mulch heavily with compost and organic matter to conserve moisture. Hay makes fabulous winter mulch. Not only is hay great for protecting the banana roots but as it rots it adds lots of nitrogen to the soil.

PRUNING

For best fruiting it is important to limit the amount of suckers in each clump. The life cycle of a banana sucker is to grow, fruit and die, so new suckers are needed to continue the fruiting of the clump. The best system is 3 trunks staggered in age from

fruiting size to newly emerging suckers. The right way to achieve this is to pick a new sucker every 3 or 4 months during the active growing season. In colder regions where the leaves have died from winter freezes it may be necessary to remove the dead tips of the trunks to help new growth emerge. Start at the top of the plant and cut a few inches off, looking for the green live center.

FRUITING YOUR BANANAS

The secret to fruiting your bananas in Zones 8b and 9 is in (1) choosing the right varieties and (2) feeding them right. We stock varieties that fruit in our 9-month growing season, but food and water are both critical. You don't have to push your bananas unless you want the fruit - they'll be beautiful anywhere they grow. Nine month bananas fruit after they have produced about 40-42 leaves on a stalk. Essentially they are big bulbs. So, we have to feed them enough to produce leaves and then yet more food to produce and ripen the flower stalk. If you live in Zone 8b though 9a and cold weather arrives before your plants flower, they will often re-sprout in the spring and produce fruit the second year. People in colder regions can dig the bulbs up and store in a basement to replant the following spring.

The first step is planting them right. Lots and lots and lots of organic matter goes in the oversized planting hole we described above. Next, plenty of water. We strongly recommend micro-sprinkler irrigation. Beginning the second year the bananas are in the ground, use 20-0-50 fertilizer as directed. Wood ash is also a good potassium source and you can use it yearly on bananas. Follow our advice, and weather permitting, you'll get bananas.

HARVESTING AND RIPENING FRUIT

To get your bananas to grow and ripen you will have to cut off the flower. Wait until you see a gap of 6-10 inches between the flower and the last bananas before cutting off the flower. Leave your stalk of bananas on the plant as late as possible. We mean wait until the night before the first frost if necessary! The longer the bananas ripen on the tree, the faster they'll be ready to eat. If they aren't ready when you cut the stalk, try hanging them in a warm dark closet. Enjoy!!

INSECT AND DISEASE CONTROL

Root rot and nematode damage are the two most common ailments of a banana plant. Root rot may occur in cold, wet winters, especially on newly established or freeze-damaged plants. Take care to mulch the clumps with hay during freezes, and waiting until spring to plant young plants will help avoid these problems. Nematode damage can be avoided by planting the banana correctly with lots of organic matter and heavily mulching the entire root zone.

VARIETY LIST

FRUITING BANANAS

APPLE - Short plump fruit with a super great flavor somewhere between apples and sweet bananas. One of the more cold hardy bananas.

DWARF CAVINDISH - Delicious thin-skinned, golden yellow 8 inch fruit are born on exotic looking dwarf trees (5 to 8 foot) with massive trunks and short, broad, closely spaced leaves. Cold hardy, and bears in 7 to 9 months when using high potassium fertilizer.

ICE CREAM - This banana plant is covered with a silvery-white powder. When the fruit is ripe, the snow-white flesh is honey sweet and tastes like vanilla ice cream.

LADYFINGER - From the Canary Islands comes one of the world's favorite gourmet delights. Ladyfinger Banana is also one of the most cold hardy bananas. When ripe this small, plump cigar-shaped banana is thin skinned, crunchy-creamy, and absolutely delicious.

MYSORA - By far one of the best flavored bananas. The tall 16-foot plants are lightly tinged with red on the stems and undersides of the new growth. They produce very large hands (up to 50 pounds) that contain short fat bananas that are rich and sweet.

DWARF ORINOCO - This cold-hardy wonder grows to 8 feet and is easy to fruit. Fruit is cooked like a plantain when unripe and eaten out of hand as a fresh banana when ripe. One of the most cold-tolerant of the fruiting bananas.

RAJA PURA - If you only want one variety of banana, get this one. It is the strongest, and easiest to fruit. This native of India rarely exceeds 8 feet in height. The tough trunks are wind and disease resistant. Hands of bananas are large, 30 to 40 pounds. The flavor is excellent. One of the most cold-tolerant of the fruiting bananas.

THOUSAND FINGERS - As the name implies, this variety will produce as many as 1000 itty-bitty (1 ½ inch) bananas. This plant only produces female flowers and will continue to produce fruit until the stalk reaches the ground. The fruit is small, with a sweet, pleasant flavor.

ORNAMENTAL BANANAS

ABYSSINIAN RED - This red-stalked giant with red-edged leaves grows to 15 feet. Slow to offset, so plant in clumps. Trim just the leaves after frost for an instant show in spring.

BASJOO - Also called the snow banana. This cold-hardy, light green beauty grows to 12 feet and has a beautiful yellow flower. Trim just the leaves after frost for flowers by July!

CHINESE YELLOW - A different kind of banana, reaching only 6 feet and holding beautiful yellow lotus like flowers at eye level. One of the most cold hardy. Trim just the leaves after frost.

ROJO - Leaves streaked with dark red (rojo is Spanish for red) on a relatively short (8 feet), thin-stalked banana. Produces clumps of stalks that look like they're wearing the banana form of camouflage.

STEVE'S THREE STORY - If you want a BIG tall green banana for that special spot, this is the one for you. Reaching three stories high (really!), we got this beauty from a customer who's grown them for years in Tallahassee, FL. Fertilize, mulch, and stand back!