

BANANAS IN CENTRAL FLORIDA

Bananas are a commonly grown plant in Central Florida. They are usually grown for the edible fruit and tropical look, but some are grown for their colorful inflorescences or ornamental foliage. Bananas are members of the Musaceae Family. This family includes plants found in the genera *Ensete*, *Musa*, and *Musella*. Members of this family are native mainly to south-eastern Asia, but some are also found wild in tropical Africa and northeastern Australia. They are cultivated throughout the tropics and subtropics and are an important staple in many diets. Bananas are not true trees but rather are large, herbaceous perennials. The trunk is fibrous but contains no woody tissue and grows from an underground rhizome. The trunk produces an inflorescence after a period from 12-16 months. This stem only flowers once in its life and then dies. Once the process is completed, new suckers arise to replace the fruiting stem so the entire clump is not lost.

Growing Tips

Bananas are very easy to grow in Central Florida given the right care. They are fast growing and respond well to water and nutrients. Most bananas prefer a sunny or part shade location. They like fertile soil so it is a good idea to enrich the area where the banana is to be planted.

Manure or compost is excellent for improving the soil. They also prefer a moist soil. Bananas are not very drought tolerant and need supplemental watering during dry periods. They are also heavy feeders and should be fed several times a year for optimum growth. A good balanced fertilizer, such as 6-6-6 or 10-10-10 with micronutrients is best. Also an application of extra potassium (potash) is beneficial to the plants. Most bananas are susceptible to nematodes, so those that are grown in rich soil and given adequate moisture are able to

resist this pest. Nematodes are a microscopic, worm-like creature that feed on the roots of bananas and other plants. Our loose, sandy soil is preferred by nematodes. Soils that have good amounts of organic material and are moist are not to their liking.

Nematodes can cause weak growing bananas or weak-rooted bananas that will topple easily in our sandy soil. Severe cases can cause death, so it is important to give the



Musa mannii

plants good soil and moisture and to keep the bananas heavily mulched.

Bananas are hardy plants in Central Florida but temperatures below 34°F will damage the foliage. Following a freeze, bananas can look pathetic with the brown, lifeless foliage hanging from the stem, but don't let this fool or discourage you. Once the weather warms, new growth

quickly begins and green leaves arise. After a couple of months, the plants are lush and healthy. The stems will not be damaged unless temperatures drop below 24°F. If this happens, new growth will quickly arise from the roots once the weather warms but fruiting will be delayed a year or so. Bananas are usually reliable fruiters in Central and South Florida but areas north of Ocala usually grow bananas as an ornamental.

Types of Bananas

Basically, there are two types of bananas: fruiting and ornamental. The fruiting bananas are also divided into two groups: ones that bear the sweet, dessert-type fruit and the cooking type also known as plantains. These are a type of banana that are very starchy with little or no sweetness to them and need to be cooked in order to eat them. There are hundreds of cultivars of edible bananas. These belong to two different species. *Musa acuminata*, are usually shorter plants (5 to 8 feet tall) with a heavier trunk. The cultivar 'Dwarf Cavendish' is popular in Central Florida and bears short sweet bananas. 'Mahoi', the Double Banana, is unusual as it often bears two stalks of fruit per trunk.



Musa ornata

'Novak', also known as the Super Dwarf Cavendish, is the shortest of all the bananas. It will only grow 2 to 3 feet tall before it bears fruit. It is excellent for a small location or for containers. 'Golden Aromatic' bears golden fruit that have a strong aroma.

The other species of edible banana that is usually grown is *Musa x paradisiaca*. This plant is a hybrid between *Musa acuminata* and *Musa balbisiana*. These are usually taller (8 to 30 feet) plants with more slender stems. The tall bananas that are very commonly seen in many yards in Central Florida are usually the cultivars 'Apple' or 'Orinoco' and are often called Horse or Ladyfinger Bananas. There are many others that will grow well here, some with unusual fruit. 'Ae Ae' is probably the most ornamental of all the bananas. The leaves are variegated with white and it bears white-striped fruit. It is very rare and can be difficult to cultivate. It needs a shaded location and an acidic soil (pH of 5.5-6.5 is best). 'African Rhinohorn' bears bananas that are 1-2 feet long. 'Burmese Blue' is

silvery-green skin and a vanilla taste. 'Pitogo' bears bananas that resemble a tennis ball in size and shape. 'Praying Hands' bears fruit that is fused together in pairs. 'Rajapuri' is an excellent variety. It is a strong grower, very resistant to nematodes, and fruits dependably with sweet bananas. It also only grows 6 to 8 feet tall. 'Saba' is the giant; it grows 20-30 feet tall with thick trunks. It bears fruit that is excellent for cooking or when eaten raw when fully ripened. It makes a dramatic tropical specimen in the landscape. 'Thousand Finger' bears an inflorescence that can reach over 8 feet long and bears hundreds of inch-long bananas. This is one of the only bananas that can have ripening and newly developing fruit on the same stalk.

Most often this banana falls over before it has finished the fruiting cycle, as it becomes top heavy.

The third groups of bananas are the ornamental species and varieties. These are grown for their foliage or their colored inflorescences and bear small, inedible fruit full of seeds. Besides members of the genus *Musa*, the

members of *Ensete* and *Musella* are also grown. *Musa acuminata* ssp. *sumatrana* is the Blood Banana. It grows 6-8 feet tall. The foliage is marked with reddish-

maroon blotches and is a solid maroon on the undersides. *Musa basjoo*, Japanese Banana, is probably the most cold hardy species. Well-mulched plants will survive into USDA zone 7 and in the warmest parts of zone 6. It is grown for its lush,

tropical look, especially in more northern, temperate climates where other bananas would not survive. *Musa beccarii* grows 4-6 feet tall with slender stems and



Musa velutina

bears an orangish-red inflorescence.

Musa laterita, often sold as *Musa ornata* 'Bronze', forms a large clump in a short time and bears a bronzy-orange inflorescence. *Musa ornata*, Purple Banana, grows 5-10 feet tall with purple inflorescence. It also comes in several varieties with red, white, pink, or rose colored inflorescences. *Musa uranoscopu*s is the Red-Flowering Banana and was formerly known as *Musa coccinea*. The inflorescences are a brilliant reddish-orange. This banana grows 5-10 feet tall and prefers an acidic soil. The Chinese Yellow Banana, *Musella lasiocarpa*, only grows 3-5 feet tall. It will bear a bright yellow, upright inflorescence that resembles an artichoke. This banana relative is hardy into zone 7. *Ensete ventricosum*, Abyssinian Banana, is a large, dramatic plant. It grows 10-15 feet tall. The trunk is usually very thick and stocky.

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Musella lasiocarpa

a new cultivar that bears blue-skinned fruit. 'Giant Plantain' is a tall variety, 10-20 feet tall, and bears a cooking plantain. 'Ice Cream' has bananas with a

Sources of Bananas

Going Bananas

Don & Katie Chafin
24401 SW 197 Ave.
Homestead, Florida 33031
(305) 247-0397
Fax: (305) 247-7877
<http://www.going-bananas.com/>

Stokes Tropicals

P.O. Box 9868
New Iberia, Louisiana 70562
1-800-624-9706
<http://www.stokestropicals.com/>

This banana relative does not sucker and is single trunked. It will grow for several years before it flowers. It will die once it completes the flowering process, but it will produce small, inedible bananas filled with seeds. This way new plants can be grown to replace the deceased parent. Some young specimens will have a red stripe on the underside of the leaves along the midrib but usually loses this as

it matures. This *Ensete* has a cultivar, 'Maurelii', that has spectacular foliage with reddish-tinged foliage.

The edible bananas produce fruit, which usually take 2-4 months to ripen. When an inflorescence emerges, it produces a purple "bud" at the end. The bracts of this "bud" open to reveal the flowers. The first flowers produced are the females. These will eventually form the fruits. After this, male flowers are produced. Modern bananas are sterile hybrids and will not produce seed. For home production, the "bud" may be removed once all the female flowers have emerged and fruit is forming. This prevents the plant from diverting energy to produce the male flowers, which are not needed. More energy then can be utilized by the plant for fruit production and better quality bananas are the result. Once the bananas reach maturity the stalk of fruit can be harvested. When the stalk is cut, hang the fruit upside down in a cool, shaded spot. In a week or so the bananas will turn color and are

ready to be eaten. As a warning, all the fruit ripens within several days of each other so be prepared to eat lots of bananas. The fruit will also ripen if left on the plant, but then it becomes attractive to squirrels, birds, rats, raccoons, and other wildlife that can reach them, and you will have a reduced harvest.

Bananas at Leu Gardens

Here at Harry P. Leu Gardens, we are growing over 70 species and cultivars of bananas. We have the largest collection of bananas of any public botanical garden in the United States. Most of the bananas are located in the Tropical Stream Garden. Bananas are easy to find locally at nurseries, garden centers and farmers markets. Some of the rare and more unusual ones will take some searching to find. One good source is the Spring Plant Sale here at Leu Gardens. Another source are mail-order nurseries with Internet sites.

— Eric Schmidt



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