Add some tropical flare to your garden – plant bananas! Bananas are vigorously growing plants that not only add a tropical feel to your garden as an ornamental plant, but can also produce an edible product.

Bananas are native to Southeast Asia, where they have been grown for thousands of years. Basically, there are only two species of banana, *Musa acuminata* and *Musa balbisiana*. The banana cultivars that are grown today are hybrids of these species. Banana cultivars vary greatly in plant and fruit size, so there is a banana plant that will fit most everyone’s needs.

The banana is a fast-growing plant. The plant consists of a fibrous root system and rhizomes, underground stems, which emerge as pseudostems (upright, trunk-like structures) that support the leaves, the flower, and the fruit-bearing stalk. They perform best on well-drained soils that are high in organic matter with a pH of 5.5-7.0. However, many cultivars will perform well on sandy soils. The most important factor is the soil drainage. Banana plants do not like to sit in soggy areas for extensive amounts of time.

The flowering stalk of the banana plant emerges from the center of the pseudostem. This usually occurs 10 to 15 months after planting. The flowers appear along the axis of the stalks and are covered by purplish-to-greenish fleshy bracts, which shed as flowering development progresses. The flowers will turn into clusters of fruits, called "hands." The banana fruit is actually considered a berry. Although most banana cultivars produce seedless fruit, some are fertile and can set seed. From the time the stalk emerges from an established plant to fruit harvest depends on the temperature, cultivar, soil moisture, and cultural practices, and ranges from 80 to 180 days.

Banana bunches can be harvested when the fingers are plump but before they begin to turn yellow. However, pick them at different times for different purposes. In general, pick bananas in the home landscape when they have reached the normal size for a particular variety. Usually, this is when the edges of the fruit have smoothed out and the sides of the fruit have swelled. Homeowners may want to harvest fruit 7 to 14 days prior to ripening on the plant. Hanging the fruit in a shady, cool place to ripen seems to allow development of better flavor than if allowed to ripen on the plant.

After a pseudostem of a banana produces fruit, that stem will die. Cut out the old pseudostem to allow room for more to emerge from the underground rhizomes. When doing so, be careful not to damage any of the other pseudostems. Also watch out for the “banana blood”. This clear sap comes out of the stems, but dries a reddish-brown color that can stain clothing and concrete.

Preferably, plant bananas in full sun for best growth and fruit production. However, they will tolerate light shade. Select a location in your landscape for the banana plants that are away from other trees, buildings and structures, and power lines. Banana plants may be planted 10 ft or more adjacent to outdoor walls as a sunscreen. Select the warmest area of the landscape that does
not flood (or remain wet) after typical summer rainfall events. In sandy soils or soils with low fertility bananas should be fertilized frequently (4 to 6 times) for maximum production.

Bananas flourish in warm to hot conditions. The growth of the plant is best between 78°F to 82°F and fruit growth at 84°F to 86°F. When temperatures drop below 60°F, plant growth slows down and it stops at 50°F. Banana plants are susceptible to chilly temperatures. Symptoms of chilling injury can include failure of the flowering stalk or fruit bunch to emerge, development of a dull yellow or greenish-gray color to ripening fruit, distorted fruit shape, and an increase in fruit rotting.

Banana plants in the home landscape are susceptible to pseudostem injury caused by lawn mowers and weed eaters. Maintain a grass-free area 2 to 5 ft or more away from the pseudostems. Never hit the pseudostem with lawn equipment. Damage to the pseudostem of the plant will result in weakening the pseudostem and if severe enough can cause it to die.

In general, bananas are fun and easy landscape plants that can add a tropical look to the landscape while providing a delicious treat. Information for this article came from the UF/IFAS publication “Banana Growing in the Florida Home Landscape”. For a free copy of this publication or for answers to other gardening questions, please call (321) –697-3000.

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