

# Banana/Plantain

## Info Sheet

### **Musa spp.**

Banana plants are the largest plants on earth without a woody stem. They are actually giant herbs in the same family as lilies, orchids and palms. In popular culture and commerce, “banana” usually refers to soft, sweet “dessert” bananas. By contrast, *Musa* cultivars with firmer, starchier fruit are called plantains or “cooking bananas”. The distinction is purely arbitrary and the terms “plantain” and “banana” are sometimes interchangeable depending on their usage.

Bananas are rich in potassium, riboflavin, niacin, and dietary fiber. They also contain Vitamins A, C, B6 and some calcium, iron, and magnesium. Because of their sweetness, they have a high energy value, making them a good supplement for active people. They have long been a natural cure to help replenish lost potassium during bouts of diarrhea or vomiting. Bananas are low in sodium and contain small quantities of the indigestible fibers cellulose, hemicellulose, and lignin, with moderate amounts of pectin, the food fiber that prevents the absorption of fats and may help lower blood cholesterol levels.

Native to India and China, the banana has been successfully grown throughout Florida for many years. It thrives during hot, humid weather and grows best in rich, well-drained soil. It is not a true tree; in fact, it grows more like a giant grass with the main stem of the plant rhizome remaining below the ground. Unprotected plants may freeze to the ground when temperatures drop below 32 degrees. However, since the main stem (rhizome) is protected underground, the banana will resprout with the return of warm weather. If plants are protected and well cared for, flowering and fruiting should occur after a 10- to 15-month growth period.

The banana plant does not grow from a seed but rather from a corm or rhizome (a bulb-like root). Each fleshy banana plant bulb will sprout new shoots year after year. Each stalk of a banana plant produces only one stem of fruit. Once harvested, the main stalk should be cut to the ground (since it will never fruit again) and to allow room for smaller, younger stalks to develop and eventually flower and fruit.

### **Planting**

Best growth can be expected when plants are set in well-drained, rich soil in full or half-day sun, though they can grow in a wide variety of soils, as long as the soil is deep and has good drainage. The effect of poorly drained soils can be partly overcome by planting in raised beds, as the plant does not tolerate poor drainage or flooding.

The planting site should also be chosen for protection from wind and cold weather, if possible. The warmest location in the home landscape is usually near the south or southeast side of the house. For ornamental purposes, bananas may be planted as close as 2 to 3 feet apart, but those planted for fruit production should be spaced about 8 to 10 feet apart.

Plants should be placed in the ground at soil level and mulch should be applied around the top of the root zone to keep the soil moist. Remember to keep mulch at least 6 inches away from the base of all plants and no more than 3 inches thick. Water plants regularly in spring and summer and slightly less during fall and winter.

Please consult our “New Plants” handout for more complete planting and watering recommendations.

### **Fertilizing**

Because of their rapid growth, bananas are heavy feeders. Use Espoma Plant-Tone or Sunniland 6-6-6. A mature plant may require as much as 1½ to 2 pounds of the above fertilizer each month. Young banana plants need a quarter to a third as much. Spread the fertilizer evenly around the plant in a circle extending 4 feet from the trunk.

Manures and natural organics (e.g. mushroom compost can also be used in addition to fertilizer). Bananas reach their full height in about a year.

### **Fruit and Harvesting**

After a 10- to 15-month growth cycle, a central stalk pushes up through the center of the leaf stalk and starts to flower. Until they open, the flowers are covered by purplish bracts and the end of the stalk has one huge, heavy purple-maroon bud. Flowers bloom and fruit develops without pollination in groups called “hands”. Harvest fruit when the first hand of bananas begins to turn yellow (approximately 90 days). Remove the entire stem from the plant or cut the bananas a hand at a time and hang in a cool, shady spot. The lower bud or male flower can be removed at any time after all hands of bananas have formed, though removal is not necessary.

The logo for Rockledge Gardens features the name in a large, teal, serif font. The word "Rockledge" is on the top line and "Gardens" is on the bottom line, with a stylized teal leaf or wave graphic behind the letters of "Gardens".

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**When available from the growers, we carry the following banana varieties:**

VARIETY	HEIGHT	USE	FRUIT SIZE	COMMENTS
<b>1000 Fingers</b>	10-12 feet	eat	1½-2½ inches	Unique as it is beautiful, this banana produces a stalk of tiny round bananas that can continue to make fruit until it touches the ground (sometimes 5 ft. long or more). Though mostly used for ornamentation, the fruit is edible & sweet.
<b>Apple/Monzano</b>	10-12 feet	cook/ eat	4-6 inches	Delicious sweet dessert banana with an apple-like aftertaste. Fruit is plump & firm. Otherwise similar to Ladyfinger. Attractive plant. Wind tolerant.
<b>Dwarf Cavendish</b>	5-8 feet	eat	6-8 inches	Dwarf variety of traditional store bought banana. Grows quickly & is a great producer. Thick, solid trunk. Fairly wind-tolerant. Medium-sized good quality fruit. Most common & widely produced banana.
<b>Dwarf Orinoco</b>	12-14 feet	cook	4-6 inches	Small vigorous plant has a thick stem. It is a heavy bearer of thick-skinned fruit of very good eating quality. The plant is hardy, but must be supported when carrying large heads of fruit.
<b>FHIA-1</b>	Same as "Goldfinger" (see below)			
<b>FHIA-21</b>	8-10 feet	cook	8-10 inches	Important commercial variety. Fruit is usually consumed green, boiled or processed into chips. When ripe, it is fried or baked. When over-ripe, it is used for making marmalade and liqueurs.
<b>Giant Plantain</b>	10-15 feet	cook	6 inches	Rather slender trunk with long fruit.
<b>Goldfinger</b>	10-12 feet	eat or cook	4-6 inches	Outstanding producer of delicious bananas with a lemony flavor. Smaller, creamier & sweeter than Cavendish. Good wind & excellent disease resistance. Good for eating or cooking. Not as sweet as most bananas, but very tasty. Very productive & easy to grow. Probably the next major commercial variety.
<b>Gran Nain</b>	5-7 feet	eat	10-12 inches	Commercial variety most often found in stores. Derived from Dwarf Cavendish, but produces higher yields.
<b>Gros Michel</b>	12-20 feet	eat	10-12 inches	Until the early 60s, the world's primary commercial banana. Fruit is bigger, hardier, tastier and more fragrant than Cavendish.
<b>Honduran Red (Jamaican Red, Cuban Red)</b>	8-10 feet	eat	5-6 inches	Known by many names, this extremely tasty & sweet fruit has a hint of peach in the taste. The fruit itself turns sunset color (orange, red, burgundy) while ripening. They have brownish-red skins and smooth, yellowish-pink, sweet flesh with a creamy texture.
<b>Hua Moa</b>	12-14 feet	cook eat	5-6 inches	Excellent Hawaiian plantain. Short and stubby, but packed with flavor. Large round leaves. World's best cooking banana.
<b>Ice Cream (Blue Java)</b>	14-18 feet	eat	5-6 inches	Flesh is snow white & sweet. Creamy texture & taste is similar to vanilla ice cream. Fruit is medium-sized, wedge-shaped and bluish-green until ripe when it turns yellow. Wind-resistant leaves. Very hardy with good cold tolerance.
<b>Ladyfinger</b>	6-8 feet	eat	3-4 inches	Very tasty Indian cultivar. Smaller, creamier & sweeter than Cavendish. Fairly hardy tree. Wind & disease resistant.
<b>Mysore</b>	10-14 feet	eat	5-6 inches	Delicious ladyfinger-like banana. Important commercial variety in India with good shelf life. Smaller, creamier & sweeter than Cavendish. Attractive green leaves with a red midriff.
<b>Orinoco (Horse Banana)</b>	10-12 feet	cook/ eat	8-10 inches	This dual-purpose banana is delicious when used like a green plantain or eaten fresh when ripe. The fruit tastes best when left on the plant until yellow. The angular fruit is long and thick. Long established in Florida, this hardy variety can endure wind and cold. Orinoco needs to be supported when carrying large heads of fruit.
<b>Pisang Ceylon</b>	10-14 feet	eat	5-6 inches	An improved version of 'Mysore', this is a very cold hardy, high quality sweet-fleshed fruit. It is the number one variety in India.
<b>Praying Hands</b>	10-12 feet	eat	6-8 inches	Unusual & distinctive, two adjacent hands of bananas are fused, giving the appearance of praying hands. Not just a collector's item, the fruits are delicious ripe, very sweet with a hint of vanilla. Vigorous & sturdy, produces fruit frequently. Some wind resistance. Fruit can ripen on tree & individual bananas can be harvested.
<b>Raja Puri</b>	6-8 feet	eat	6-7 inches	Very tasty, sweet dessert banana. Smooth & creamy flesh. Resistant to disease, nematode & borers & will survive a light frost with leaves intact. Will often bear fruit in less than a year. Thick trunk & wide, wind-resistant leaves. One of India's favorite bananas.
<b>Williams</b>	6-8 feet	eat	8-10 inches	Former commercial variety. Fruit is large & sweet. Tree is productive, wind resistant & cold hardy.