



Going Bananas!

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Paul J. Ciener Botanical Garden has a love affair with displaying banana plants. Some are hardy and have thrived in the tropical garden while others prefer a warmer dormant period seeking shelter in the basement during the winter months. Currently, there are at least three hardy species of bananas that make up the summer garden. Several more that are considered tropical can be grown seasonally.

Musa velutina (r) commonly known as the pink velvet hardy banana has reached 8-10 feet tall and wide. PJCBG originally planted this one in the tropical garden in 2011 where it dies back to the ground every winter, re-emerges in spring and reaches mature height by season's end. Just a short two years later, marked the first set of flowers followed by pink bananas. The pink flowers rose from the centers of the green stalks which then led to numerous, pink, small bananas. *Musa velutina* is not edible, rather the pink fruit is full of seed which can be collected and grown into new plants.



Photo coming soon

Musella lasiocarpa (l) or Chinese yellow banana is also on display in the tropical garden. Chinese yellow banana is slightly smaller in size actually producing a mass of stems and leaves and topping at 6 feet tall and wide. Large, yellow flower buds rise from the center of the stems with each petal splaying out like a star. Don't expect fruit in this one as it's grown primarily as an ornamental banana.



Musa 'Black Thai' (l) has the hardiness potential, but smaller plants may not overwinter outdoors. Rather, dig young plants in the fall before winter sets in. Since this one offsets rapidly, several plants can be stored and replanted throughout the gardens for good measure while one or two can be left in the ground to test for winter hardiness. To aid in winter hardiness, a wire cage should be placed around the stem about 4 feet tall filled with shredded leaves to keep the lower stalks and roots slightly warmer during the winter months. *Musa* 'Black Thai' is a very upright banana growing to 18 feet in one season. The stems are purple almost black offering a nice contrast to the bluish-green leaves.

The best banana for hardiness goes to *Musa basjoo* or simply, hardy banana (3 photos below). This one will grow 10 feet tall and wide or more depending on the location and climate. Therefore, give it plenty of space to grow. Eventually mature plants will produce large yellow flowers that will give rise to numerous bananas, about half the size of a Chiquita® Banana. In mild winters, expect the trunks to remain green; therefore, do not trim winter damage until February or March. Flower buds begin their cycle at the base pushing through the center of the stems. If the winter causes damage to an emerging flower bud, or if the stem were cut by accident, the stem will die. It is best to leave stems to avoid the risk of losing flower buds.

Thankfully, most bananas offset rapidly.



To add to our non-hardy bananas, *Musa* 'Siam Ruby' (l) has been in our possessions since 2008. *Musa* 'Siam Ruby' was originally brought to the United States by plantsmen, Tony Avent, owner of Plant Delights Nursery in Raleigh, NC. Since then, it has been a mainstream plant at most area garden centers. It is a red leafed banana with yellow specks throughout the leaves and stems. At maturity, it will reach 6 feet wide and tall.

We are also growing the variegated blood banana or *Musa sumatrana* 'Zebrina' (l) which is a dark green form with red stripes throughout the leaves, as well as the Abyssinian banana (r), a red stemmed form producing large green leaves with red veins.



Bananas are tough plants that thrive in the summer heat and humidity. Once established and for optimum size and vigor, water only during dry spells. Bananas can be grown equally well in the ground and in containers. Just like other containerized plant, supplemental watering may be needed. Non-hardy bananas can be easily stored in the basement or crawl space for winter. Simply remove the leaves with a sharp knife or saw while leaving the main trunk, dig up the roots removing most of the soil and place the root ball in a large trash bag. By providing a dark, cool environment, the bananas will cease growth and sit dormant all winter long.