

Growing Bananas

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How To Grow Banana Plants And Keep Them Happy.

Growing bananas does not take much effort, but it does require that you get a few things right when you first get started.

Banana plants can offer many benefits:

- They make great windbreaks or screens,
- they can keep the sun of the hot western side of your house,
- they utilize the water and nutrients in waste drains (think washing water or outdoor shower),
- the leaves can be fed to horses, cows and other grazers,
- the dried remains of the trunks can be used for weaving baskets and mats.



Oh, and they give you bananas. Lots of bananas!

But when I look around friends' gardens then I see some pretty sad looking banana plants growing there. It helps to understand what bananas like and dislike if you want them to be happy!

Banana plants like:

- Rich, dark, fertile soils.
- Lots of mulch and organic matter. **LOTS.** Just keep piling it on.
- Lot of nitrogen and potassium. (Chicken manure!)
- Steady warmth, not too hot and not too cold. (Bananas are sissies when it comes to temperatures...)
- Steady moisture, in the ground and in the air.
- The shelter of other bananas! That's the most overlooked aspect by home growers...

Banana plants dislike:

- Strong winds.

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Have you heard of the neem tree?

The tropical tree has many uses and benefits, both in the garden and in the home.

Learn more about growing neem trees, using [neem pesticide](#), making [neem soap](#), [neem shampoo](#) and more...

More detail on all that below.

Banana varieties

Cavendish is the variety that you know from the shops. It's a stout variety that produces large heavy bunches.

Lady Fingers are very tall and slender plants and have sweeter fruit.

Plantains are cooking bananas. They are drier and more starchy. You use them green like you would use potatoes, and they taste similar.



(80% of all bananas grown in the world are plantain varieties! They are an important staple food in many tropical countries.)

There are other varieties, but those are the most popular and most commonly grown.

How do bananas grow?

Bananas aren't real trees, not even palm trees, even though they are often called banana palms. Bananas are perennial herbs. (Gingers, heliconias and bird-of-paradise flowers are distant relatives of bananas. They are in the same order, *Zingiberales*.)

Banana trunks consists of all the leaf stalks wrapped around each other. New leaves start growing inside, below the ground. They push up through the middle and emerge from the centre of the crown. So does the flower, which finally turns into a bunch of bananas.

Here is a picture series showing how the flower looks at first, and how the bananas appear and curl up towards the light.



Those pictures were taken over the course of a few days. You can pretty much watch this happen. But now it will take another two months or so, depending on the temperature, for the fruit to fill out and finally ripen.

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suckers, little baby plants.

At the base of a banana plant, under the ground, is a big rhizome, called the corm.

The corm has growing points and they turn into new suckers. These suckers can be taken off and transplanted, and one or two can be left in position to replace the mother plant.

Great, so now you know what to do once you have bananas growing in your garden, but how do you start?



How to get started growing bananas.

First you need to make sure that you can grow bananas where you are.

You need a tropical or warm subtropical climate. Bananas can handle extreme heat (if they have enough water), but they don't like it. They can handle cool weather for a short while, but they don't like that either. Below 14°C (57F) they just stop growing.

If the temperatures drop any lower the fruit suffers (the skin turns greyish) and the leaves can turn yellow. Frost kills the plant above ground, but the corm can survive and may re-shoot.

The ideal temperature range for banana growing is around 26-30°C (78-86F).

You need a lot of water to grow bananas. The huge soft leaves evaporate a lot, and you have to keep up the supply. Bananas also need high humidity to be happy. (Where I live the commercial banana growers water their plants two or three times a day with sprinklers to keep up the humidity in the banana plantation!)

You need very rich soil. If you don't have good soil to start with, make some. Incorporate lots and lots of compost and plenty of chicken manure before you plant your bananas (wood ash for extra potassium doesn't hurt either), and then mulch them very thickly. And keep mulching and feeding them!

And you need room so you can plant enough of them together. Bananas need shelter from wind. Growing many banana plants together increases the humidity in the middle, evens out temperature changes a bit, and it shades and cools the trunks. (You don't want to cook the flower that's forming in the middle...)

If you get a chance look at a commercial banana plantation somewhere. The outside rows, especially the western side, always look sad. The best bananas grow on the inside...

You should plant bananas in blocks or clumps, not single rows and definitely not single plants. If you have very little room you can grow a few banana

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Planting bananas

You can not grow bananas from seeds. Banana plants don't produce seeds.

The best way is to start with the above mentioned suckers. Know someone who grows bananas? Talk to them. Every banana plant produces a lot more suckers than you need, so people usually have plenty to give away.

Only take suckers from vigorous banana plants. The suckers should have small, spear shaped leaves and ideally be about four feet high. (Smaller suckers will take longer to fruit and the first bunch will be smaller.)

Cut the sucker from the main banana plant with a sharp shovel. Cut downwards between the mature plant and the sucker. You have to cut through the corm. It's not easy...

Make sure you get a good chunk of corm and many roots with it. Chop the top off the sucker to reduce evaporation while you move it and while it settles into its new home. (Remember, the growing point is at the bottom of a banana plant. You can decapitate the sucker. It will grow back.)

You can also dig up a bit of corm and chop it into bits. Every bit that has an eye can be planted and will grow into a banana plant. But it takes longer than growing banana suckers...

Plant your bits or suckers in your well prepared banana patch, keeping two to five metres between them.

The spacing depends on your layout. My bananas grow in a block of several double rows. Within the double rows the spacing is two to three metres, but there are two plants in each position, suckers of the initial plant. And I have four to five metres between the double rows.

I also have a banana circle around an outdoor shower where I only have two metres between individual plants, and they are growing in a haphazard way. And if you have just a single clump of a few banana plants you can put them even closer together.

Keep your banana plants moist but not too wet in the early days, or they may rot. (They don't have leaves yet to evaporate water, so they don't need much.)

Maintaining your banana patch

The most common cause of death for bananas is lack of water. The most common cause for not getting fruit is starvation. Banana plants blow over in strong winds. Protect them and feed them and water them and all will be well. Other than that bananas don't need much maintenance.

Just remove any dead leaves and cut down the dead plants every now and then.

You get bigger fruit if you remove all unwanted suckers, only keeping the best

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The best suckers are the ones with the small, spear shaped leaves, NOT the pretty ones with the big round leaves!

Why? A sucker that is still fed by the mother plant does not need to do much photosynthesis, so it doesn't need to produce big leaves.

And a sucker that is well looked after by the mother plant will produce better fruit and be stronger than one that had to struggle on its own...



A mature plantation is pretty much self mulching. Just throw all the leaves and old trunks etc. back under the plants. You can also grow other plants in the understory to produce more mulch. (I use cassava, sweet potato and croton).

You just need to sprinkle on some fertiliser every now and then, to replace what you took out of the system when you took the bananas. Keep the fertiliser close to the trunk as bananas don't have a big root system.

Growing banana fruit

You may see your first flower emerge after about six months, depending on the weather. Leave the leaves around it, especially the one protecting the top bend of the stalk from sunburn!

As the purple flower petals curl back and drop off they reveal a "hand" of bananas under each. Each banana is a "finger".

You may get anything between four to a dozen or more full hands. Then, under the next petal, you'll see a hand of teeny weeny excuses for bananas. Those are the male fingers.

The male fingers just dry and drop off. Only the stalk remains. If you let it grow it will eventually reach the ground.



Some people break off the "bell" (the bunch of purple flower petals at the end) about 15 cm below the last female hand. That way the banana plant puts its energy and reserves into growing big bananas, and not into growing a long stalk. (Commercial banana growers also remove some of the bottom female hands, so the remaining bananas grow bigger.)

Not everyone thinks that way, though. This is a comment from one of my readers:

I never cut the flower off the bananas. The hummers (Ed: hummingbirds) love them too much. As you said, there are always enough bananas around and though I sell them I have to keep my hummers happy.

A good prop would be a long stick with a u-shaped hook at the end. But a long enough plank or pole can do the job, too. I leave that to your ingenuity.

Bananas are ready to be picked when they look well rounded with ribs, and the little flowers at the end are dry and rub off easily.



They will eventually ripen on the bunch, and those bananas taste the best. But once they start they ripen very quickly, faster than you can eat or use them. So you may as well cut the top hands off a bit earlier and ripen them on the kitchen bench.

You can also cut the whole bunch and hang it somewhere if you need to protect it from possums or birds or other thieves. But then all bananas will ripen at once! So be prepared.

You can preserve bananas for use in cooking and baking by peeling and freezing them. Or, to preserve them for eating, peel, split in half lengthwise and dry them.

Once the bunch is picked the rest of the plant will die quickly. Cut it to the ground, throw on some chook poo, and let the next sucker grow while you process all the bananas...

Tip: commercial banana growers use bunch covers (plastic bags open at both ends that they slip over the bunch and tie at the top) to protect bananas from diseases, insects, sunburn and marauders. You can try to buy those bags at a rural supplies store, or beg some of a grower.

I used to bag my bananas (hard to get out of habits after four years of working on commercial plantations) but I don't bother any more. Even if the birds get a few, there are still more than enough left for me and the chickens and the dog and all friends and their families and freezing and drying... So why not let the wild birds partake of the bounty as well!

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