

Banana

Musa species

MEW-suh

Growing your own bananas in a pot is always a conversation starter, but harvesting the small bananas is even more impressive. With their tropical look, bananas will receive well-deserved attention in any space, whether grown in a pot inside, placed on an outdoor patio, or planted directly into a summer garden. Most banana plants need ample feed, plenty of water, and high levels of sunlight for quick, lush growth.

Horticulturally speaking, banana plants sprout from a bulb. Once a banana plant is mature, a flower stem travels up the inside of the trunk (technically known as a pseudostem) and emerges at the top. The flower head hangs down gracefully, and the first section of stem contains the female flowers that will become the bunch of bananas once they're pollinated. Male flowers then appear on the stem as the flower head continues to elongate. Bunches of bananas are called "hands." Once the fruits form, you can let the bunch hang on for several months until the bananas start to ripen to a golden yellow. Or pick the bananas when they're still green and allow them to ripen off the plant. After harvest, the flowering stem or pseudostem needs to be cut back to the ground. New offshoots, or pups, that have appeared during the growing season around the central stem will then replace the old plant. You can divide and pot up these pups if desired or leave them to grow in the same pot. Keep in mind, though, that bananas are fast-growing plants that can easily overwhelm their neighbors in a pot.

Many banana varieties grow too tall for most houses and home greenhouses; some of the best dwarf varieties for indoors are listed on page 59.

Plant Particulars

Size and form

3–6 feet; upright herbaceous plant

Bloom season

Intermittent throughout the year

Fruiting season

Year-round

Family

Musaceae

Origin

Tropical West Africa



Dwarf banana

➔ Regulating Ripening

Commercial bananas that are harvested green are ripened by exposure to ethylene gas. However, bananas naturally emit ethylene gas. As the fruit ripens, sugar content increases and starch content goes down.

Let your green bananas ripen the old-fashioned way: leave them out at room temperature. Optimal temperatures are 68–70°F (20–21°C) with 90 percent humidity.

If timing is important, put your green bananas in a cool spot, about 58°F (14°C), to slow the ripening process. They will keep for up to 20 days.



ABOVE: 'Super Dwarf Cavendish' is also called apple banana because it bears such small bananas. It fruits when only 3–4 feet tall.

Lady finger banana (*Musa acuminata* 'Dwarf Lady Finger') is valued for its small, finger-sized bananas and slender growth. It produces deliciously sweet bananas within a year or two, flowering and fruiting when less than 4 feet tall.

Apple banana (*M. acuminata* 'Super Dwarf Cavendish') is a miniature "tree," a shorter form of 'Dwarf Cavendish' that grows only 3–4 feet tall. It will form a hand (bunch) of bananas within two to three years. If you remove all but a few side pups, however, the rate of fruit production will increase. Sometimes this variety forms its hand of bananas inside the flower stem. This is called "choking." If this happens, make a lateral cut in the pseudostem and pull the bananas out. Be sure to do this early in the flowering/fruiting cycle.

'Rajapuri' (*M. balbisiana* 'Rajapuri') bears when it reaches 6 feet tall. This will take 12 to 18 months.

'Vente Cohol' (*M. balbisiana* 'Vente Cohol') is the earliest fruiting banana; it can produce mature hands of bananas within a year. Plants eventually reach 5 feet tall.

Growing Conditions

Light: Full sun

Soil: Well-drained potting mix

Minimum indoor temperature: Most cultivars, 60°F (15°C); 'Super Dwarf Cavendish' and 'Rajapuri' tolerate temperatures as low as 40°F (4°C), although growth slows or stops and plants may become dormant

Hardiness outdoors: Most cultivars, Zone 9; 'Rajapuri' can be grown outside in Zone 8 if mulched over winter

Care

Fertilizing: Heavy feeders; provide constant fertilizer, especially when temperatures are warm.

Pruning: Remove yellowing leaves as needed; cut back to soil level after harvest.

Potential Problems

Pests: Some susceptibility to spider mites in dry, warm conditions

Foliar disease: Susceptible to a fungus that results in brown patches and damaged leaves when temperatures fall below 60°F (15°C)

Root disease: Not highly susceptible, except in poorly drained soil



A banana flower is both beautiful to look at and delicious to eat.