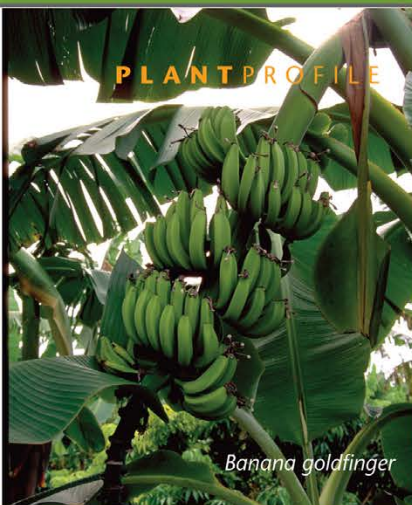




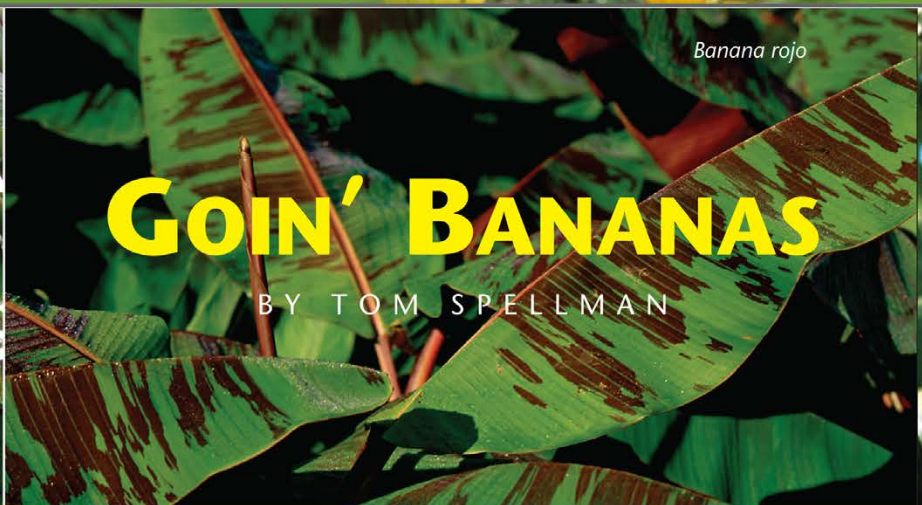
## A Garden Compass Re-Publication

...by Dave Wilson Nursery

PLANT PROFILE



*Banana goldfinger*



*Banana rojo*

# GOIN' BANANAS

BY TOM SPELLMAN

Banana plants fit well into our southwestern- or Mediterranean-style gardens. They create a great accent, with large glossy leaves and stately, upright growth habit. They are great as a single specimen or planted in groups. Container culture is also popular, using some of the more compact dwarf varieties.

Bananas are members of the Musaceae family; all are of the genus *Musa*. Different species display a variation of size, color, flowering and hardiness. Originating in Indo-Malaysia, bananas were valued as an early food source and critical to the survival of the early Malaysian people. By the end of the 19th century, the banana was being grown in virtually every adaptable climate worldwide. Today, bananas are the fourth-largest fruit crop in the world, after grapes, citrus and apples.

Often described as a tree, the banana is, in fact, a giant herbaceous perennial, arising from underground rhizomes. The trunk or "pseudostem" is made up of a series of tightly wrapped leaf sheaths. Each new leaf pushes its way out through the center of the pseudostem and in 10 to 15 months, the stem terminates and produces a large flower stock or "inflorescence." The banana flowers are "parthenocarpic," meaning they require no cross-pollination to produce fruit. Consequently, there are few, if any seeds in cultivated bananas. Banana fruits are produced in small clusters of 6 to 10 fruit called

hands. A full bunch of bananas can contain as many as 100 hands of fruit and weigh up to 100 pounds. With this in mind, it is a good idea to brace large bunches, as they may topple over and break the main stem.

In the home garden, banana plants prefer a warm location with lots of sun or filtered light. It's best to grow them where they have some wind protection as well as protection from freezing temperatures. If possible, choose a location close to a wall or a structure on the wind-protected side. Most mature banana plants will tolerate wintertime temperatures down to 28 degrees F. for short durations. Young plants should be covered and protected from anything below freezing. Plants that do freeze severely can recover and re-grow from the root system. After severe freezes, cut the dead and damaged stocks to almost ground level in March. Don't cut too early because the old stock will act as insulation for the rhizomes.

In California, bananas have few pest and disease problems. Control gophers, as they can undermine the stems and topple large plants. Banana plants will grow in most soil types but prefer a slightly acidic soil with a pH between 5.5 and 7.0. They do not tolerate soil that is too salty or has poor drainage. For best results, choose a sandy, fast-draining soil and amend with some compost. Mulch the soil surface two to four inches deep to hold in moisture, keep soil cool and increase bioactivity.

Irrigation should be thorough, and plants should not be allowed to completely dry out. Bananas will use lots of water during the summer when they are growing vigorously but use little when the weather is cool. The biggest killer of banana plants in the southwest is over watering during the cool season, which can lead to root rot. Fertilize every 60 days, March through September, with a balanced, organic-base fertilizer, which includes minor elements like zinc, iron and magnesium. Don't feed during the cool season, as the plants need to harden up for the winter. Container plants need more frequent irrigation, light and fertilization.

After a main stem has fruited, that stem will die. Remove it close to ground level and allow one of the young pups to become the new, primary fruiting stem. Pups originate from the base of the plant. For maximum fruit production, keep stem pups reduced to one or two off the main stem. When harvesting mature fruit (plump but still green), you can remove the whole bunch and hang the stock in a cool, dry place. Fruit will color and ripen from the top down. You can also leave the bunch attached to the stem and harvest a few hands at a time, as they begin to show mature color. This will extend your fruit season. Ornamental varieties or standard selections grown just for ornamental appeal can have as many stems or pups in a cluster as you desire.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF STOKES TROPICALS

