

ORNAMENTAL BANANAS – NOT EDIBLE, BUT BEAUTIFUL

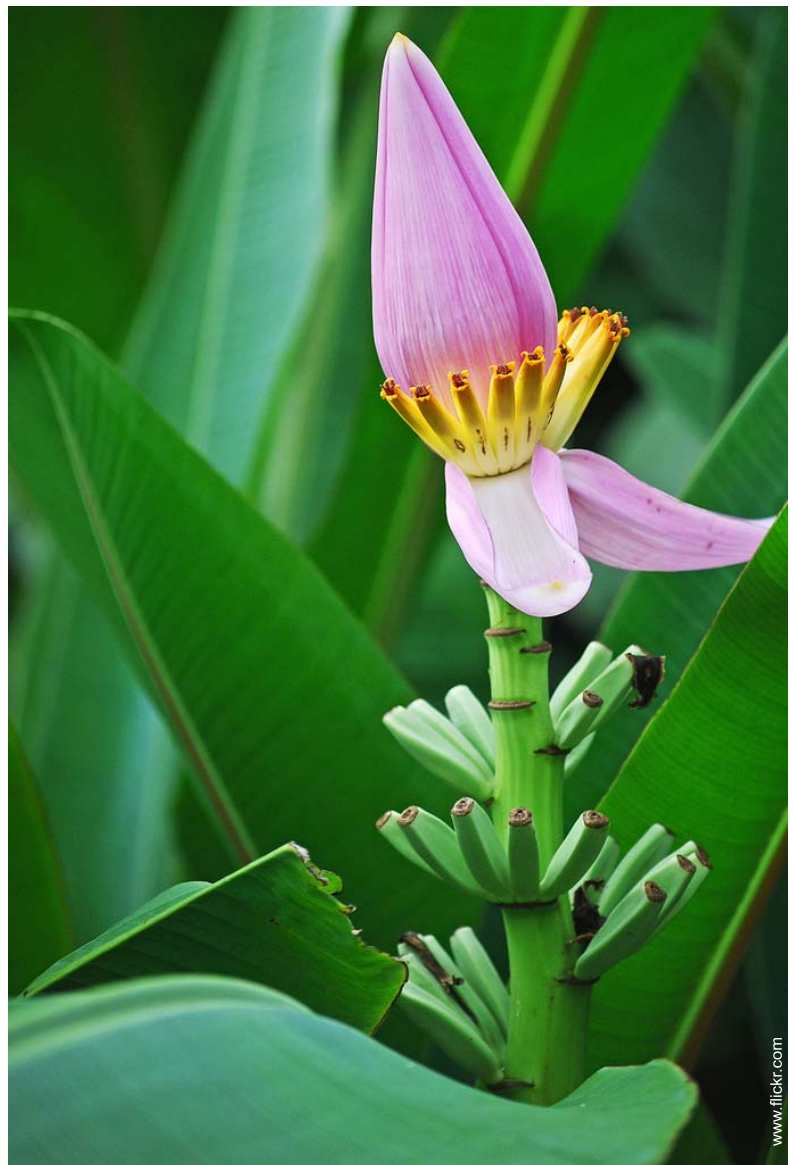
Many home landscapes have a banana plant or two and, depending on the care, there may be an occasional bunch of bananas to enjoy. However, there are many other types of bananas known for their ornamental flowers or foliage and not their fruit. What fruit is produced may also be attractive, but tends to be inedible. However, what these bananas lack in fruit, they make up in beauty that is long-lasting and exotic looking.

To begin, ornamental bananas tend to be small as compared to their edible relatives. Also, the inflorescence or banana flower is actually made up of colorful bracts. One of the more common ornamental bananas is *Musa ornata* or the Purple Banana. This ornamental banana only grows about six feet tall with the typical green banana leaves. What is special about this ornamental banana is the beautiful flower formed from lavender/purple bracts. There are many cultivars of *M. ornata* available which come in red, white, pink or rose color. Two other similar species of ornamental banana often mistaken for cultivars of *Musa ornata* are 'African Red' which has bracts of deep red and 'Milky Way' known for its pure white bracts.

Another species of ornamental banana is known as the Red Torch Banana or Red-Flowering Banana. This banana has an upright red flower which reminds you of one produced by cannas. Another similar ornamental banana is the Orange Flame Banana. The Orange Flame Banana is a small plant of six feet or less with thin leaves and flower bracts of intense orange-red color. Both of these ornamental bananas produce long-lasting flowers suitable for cutting.

The pink velvet banana is another very stunning ornamental which produces a pink to reddish inflorescence or flower. This is followed by a small pink velvety banana fruit that peels open at maturity exposing both pulp and hard seeds. This is a small plant of just about five feet tall and will do well in a partially shaded area.

(Continued on page 2)



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In addition to colorful bracts and fruit, some ornamental bananas provide interesting foliage. One such banana is known by many names including 'Bloodleaf' or 'Zebrina'. The leaves of this banana are green with purplish-red stripes and blotches with dark red color under the leaf. Very quick growing to eight feet tall, the colorful foliage will really stand out in any landscape.

One final ornamental banana worth growing produces unique yellow bracts. Known as the Chinese Yellow Banana, this ornamental has gray-green foliage and is small only growing three to five feet tall. The flower is cone-shaped (almost artichoke in appearance) and about 12 inches long. This long-lasting flower also reminds one of a lotus flower.

For more information about our Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Program, please contact our FYN Horticulture Program Assistant Allison Turner at 764.4351 or email Allison.Turner@CharlotteFL.com.

Allison can help educate you about the FYN Program so you can create a beautiful, Florida-Friendly landscape that saves you time and money while conserving precious water resources and reducing pollution.

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As with all bananas, enrich the planting site with organic matter such as well-rotted manure or compost. Plant in a sunny to part shade location and feed several times a year with a complete slow-release fertilizer such as an 8-2-12 or its equivalent plus micronutrients as per label directions. Besides growing these ornamental bananas in the landscape, some of the smaller types can also be grown successfully in large containers.

Where can you get these plants? I have seen the Chinese Yellow Banana for sale in local garden centers from time to time. You may have to check the Internet for on-line nurseries that offer other varieties. Make sure to include some of these beauties in your yard today!

Resources:

- McLaughlin, J. (2006) *A Word or Two About Gardening – Looking to Accentuate the Tropical? Ornamental Bananas, Bird-of-Paradise and Traveler's Tree Provide Striking Foliage and Showy Flowers*. Miami-Dade County UF/IFAS Extension Service.
- Schmidt, E. (2008) *Ornamental of the Month: Go Bananas! The appeal of flowering banana plants goes beyond their more fruitful attributes*. Harry P. Leu Gardens, Orlando, Florida.
- Schmidt, E. (2008) *Bananas in Central Florida*. Harry P. Leu Gardens, Orlando, Florida.
- Christman, S. (2008) *Musa x paradisiaca*. Floridata, Tallahassee, Florida.

Ralph Mitchell is the Extension Director/Horticulture Agent for Charlotte County UF/IFAS Extension Service. Ralph can be reached at 941.764.4344 or by email: Ralph.Mitchell@CharlotteFL.com.



RALPH MITCHELL

Extension Director/Horticulture Agent
Ralph.Mitchell@CharlotteFL.com

CHARLOTTE COUNTY UF/IFAS EXTENSION SERVICE

25550 Harbor View Road, Suite 3 - Port Charlotte, Florida 33980
941.764.4340 - 941.764.4343 (fax) - <http://charlotte.ifas.ufl.edu>

