

Hardy Bananas

Bananas are native to tropical Asia. The two most commonly grown varieties in our area are Japanese Fiber Banana (*Musa basjoo*) and Chinese Yellow Banana (*Musella lasiocarpa*). With a little winter protection, you can keep hardy bananas growing in the PNW year after year.

Japanese Fiber Banana is the taller growing variety, and can reach 20 feet tall with a trunk up to 12 inches in diameter. The plants have to produce about 35 leaves before it will flower and fruit. The fruit is basically inedible because it is so full of seeds. Chinese Yellow Banana grows to about five feet high, and has spectacular waxy yellow flowers that last up to six months. It needs to be about two years old before it will flower.

SITE: Plant both varieties in full sun for maximum growth; however, they can grow in shade as well. Bananas will tolerate heavy clay soils, but will not survive in standing water. Because bananas have such large leaves, it's best to avoid planting in windy areas so they don't tear. Chinese Yellow Banana can tolerate more wind as the leaves are smaller and thicker.

CARE: Bananas need constant moisture and lots of nitrogen fertilizer to grow to their maximum potential. You can use water soluble Miracle-Gro Azalea and Rhododendron fertilizer (30-10-10) or E.B.Stone Azalea, Camelia & Gardenia fertilizer (5-5-3).

Pests are not generally a problem; keep an eye out for aphids and spider mites, especially if grown indoors, which can often be dealt with by spraying the top & underside of the leaves with water. Do this each time you water the plant as a preventative measure.

WINTER PROTECTION: You should mulch the banana corm or root during the winter to increase the hardiness. After the first hard frost, the leaves will die down. The trunk should be wrapped with house insulation, bubble wrap, Styrofoam sheeting or burlap and covered with plastic sheeting to keep the insulation dry. Place a plastic pot over the trunk to keep the moisture out. This prevents the trunk from freezing to the ground. After wrapping the trunk, mulch the trunk with up to two feet of straw, leaves, sawdust or bark mulch. Compost or bagged manure (either chicken or steer) can be used at a depth of 12" if preferred. Nitrogen from the composted manure will benefit the plant next year. On multi-trunked plants, each trunk should be wrapped separately but can be mulched together. If needed a small fence or chicken wire can be used to cage the mulch material and keep it in place.

IN SPRING: By mid-May, the new growth in the center of the trunk will start pushing the plastic pot up. At that time unwrap the trunks and pull back the mulch. New growth will be slow at first. By the time nights are staying warm (50°F or so) it will be time to continue fertilizing.



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