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Why Are There Seeds In My Banana? A Look at Ornamental Bananas

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In many parts of the world bananas are a staple food, while in other regions they are a highly valued ornamental plant. Bananas are the fourth most important food crop in the world, and they are also used in many other ways—every part of the plant has value. In addition to the standard dessert bananas, there is another group of species in the banana genus that are much less known in the United States but offer some wonderful options as landscape plants. This group of banana species is known as ornamental bananas. This paper sheds some light on ornamental banana cultivars that provide a tropical atmosphere to gardens in the Southeast region of the United States.

Bananas (*Musa spp*) are the fourth most important food crop in the world (Fonsah, Krewer, and Rieger 2005). In addition, every part of the plant can be transformed into a valuable by-product. It is used for beer production, livestock food, living shade, roofing thatch, and as eco-friendly cooking wraps and plates in many parts of the world (Krewer, Fonsah, and Wallace forthcoming; Fonsah and Chidebelu 1995). Although the United States is not a major banana producer, ornamental bananas are grown in the warmer areas of the Southern regions. Bananas are considered one of the most beautiful plants that provide a tropical and subtropical atmosphere to landscape gardens and pools-sides in the region (Krewer, Fonsah, and Wallace forthcoming; Sauls n.d.; Francko, Wilson, and Leary-Elderkin 2007).

Ornamental bananas offer the same beautiful foliage as dessert bananas, and some varieties even carry additional colorations in their leaves and inflorescence. Many ornamental bananas also have very brightly colored flowers and bracts, and in certain cases the fruit is also vibrantly colored. Most of the ornamental bananas are shorter in stature than dessert bananas (Fonsah, Krewer, and Rieger 2004). In almost all cases the fruits contain many seeds that limit their use as a food crop. Some of the blossom colors displayed by this

group include yellow, purple, pink, red, white, and multicolored. This group of bananas has the ability to add both the tropical effect to the landscape along with vividly colored blooms produced over a period of weeks or even months (Wallace, Krewer, and Fonsah 2007a; 2007b; Krewer, Fonsah, and Wallace forthcoming).

Ornamental bananas of the *Rhodochlamys* section (Häkkinen 2007) provide beautiful flowers and an attractive atmosphere year round in the tropical countries, but are dormant during the winter in warm temperate areas. However, the lower South can enjoy at least six months of beautiful tropical foliage (Wallace, Krewer, and Fonsah 2007a; 2007b; Stevens 2006). In most cases the plants will also regrow from corms overwintered in the ground and bloom the following summer.

The following cultivars have performed well in the area of Savannah, Georgia, U.S.A.

Musa African Red

“African Red” is a beautiful banana plant with medium height. The stem is usually about three to four feet tall at blooming. The plant grows vigorously and produces numerous blooms. The inflorescence is erect and does not have a bending stage like the edible banana bunch. Each hand is composed of three to five fingers maximum (Figure 1).

Musa Ornata “Magenta”

There are different colors of *Musa ornata*—some are pink, rose, and purple. Usually the plants grow vigorously and as tall as three to five feet. The growth rate is very fast and the plant can produce seven to eight blooms in a year. These plants are sold under

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Figure 1. The Musa African Red at Bloom.

Picture taken by Richard Wallace.

different names, which can be confusing. Some of them are readily cross-pollinated with other plants, but not all of them produce pollen or set seeds.

Similar to Musa African Red, the inflorescence remains erect until they bloom. Musa ornata “Magenta” has a purplish inflorescence and the fruit is embedded in beautiful green leaves (Figure 2). The finger of the matured fruit is about three inches long and about one inch in diameter. When peeled the fruit looks similar to some ethnic banana cultivars in color and pulp. However, there are numerous black seeds inside the fruit.

Musa Coccinea

Musa coccinea is a very attractive ornamental banana plant. It is generally three to four feet tall at bloom. With a moderate growth rate, it produces five to six blooms per year. The blooms last for many weeks and their bracts are not detached from the bloom, which makes them even more attractive. Their fruits are smaller than Musa ornata “Magenta” (Figure 3).

It is worth mentioning that Cavendish and ethnic bananas cultivars also provide beautiful tropical

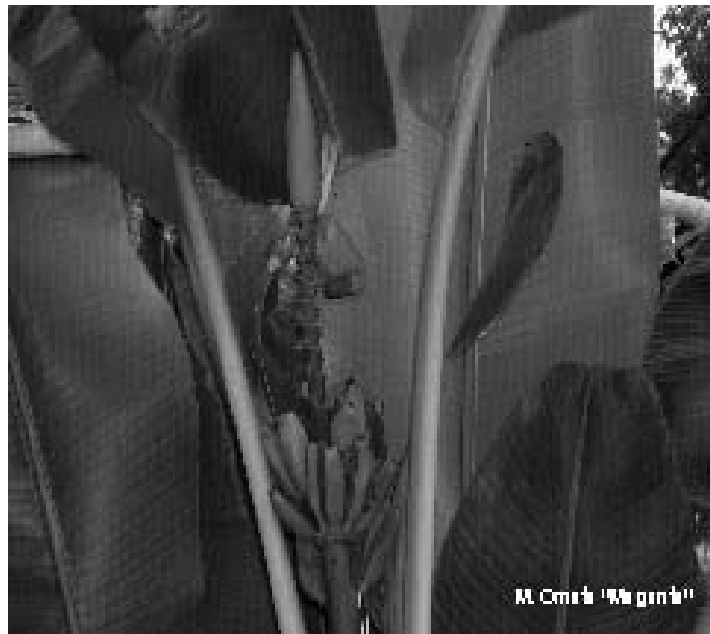


Figure 2. Musa Ornata “Magenta.”

Photographs taken by Richard Wallace.

foliage even though they have non-descript blooms compared to Musa “Africa Red,” Musa ornata “Magenta,” and Musa coccinea. However, these non-ornamental cultivars can also be utilized for landscaping depending on the desired design. Figure 4 shows an attractive landscape design utilizing a dessert banana cultivar.

Conclusion

Ornamental bananas can provide an attractive tropical atmosphere under Southeastern conditions. These plants possess a vigorous and rapid growth rate and typically grow from three to four feet in height. From four to seven suckers are produced annually. In addition, many types of dessert bananas can be grown for ornamental purposes where taller plants are desired.

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Figure 3. Musa Coccinea at Bloom.

Picture taken by Richard Wallace.

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Figure 4. A Dessert Banana Cultivar Used for Landscaping at the Macon Mall in Georgia.

Photograph taken by Esendugue Greg Fonsah.