

GROWERTALKS

Culture Notes

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Ensete: Thriller Banana

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The Red Abyssinian Banana (*Ensete ventricosum Maurelii*) makes a great showy centerpiece in a spring planter, creating a refreshing change from the standard dracaena. With its dark-green to brown upper foliage, red-orange underside and deep-red midrib, this banana plant will create an eye-catching combo that will appeal to those looking for something beyond the traditional.

Native to lower-mountain tropical regions of Africa and Asia, the Red Abyssinian can reach heights of 10 to 15 ft. tall, although in cooler climates it would be unlikely to reach this size. The giant paddle-shaped leaves can also reach a length of 10 ft. Its fast-growing nature allows growers to receive rooted cuttings in late January and produce a plant large enough to create an outstanding

focal point for an April planter.

Rooting, temperature and light

The rooted cutting should be planted immediately upon arrival in a well-drained, soil-based media. To promote active growth, temperatures should be maintained around 68F (20C). Although high light levels are preferred, take care to protect the plant from direct hot sunlight. This, combined with a well-ventilated greenhouse, creates ideal conditions.

Spacing

Crop spacing should be wide enough to prevent plants from shading each other, as foliage color will be less intense when light levels are inadequate. In addition to this, the plant stem will be much stronger as tight spacing forces the plant to compete for light, creating a weak and elongated stem. Improper spacing will cause the lower foliage to turn yellow, as well.

Water and fertilizer

The Red Abyssinian requires a lot of water, and should not be allowed to dry out between waterings. A heavy feeder, it requires a well-balanced fertilizer, and pH levels of 5.5 to 6.5.

Pests and diseases

Pests to watch out for include spider mites, aphids and mealybugs. Monitor your plants every week, taking care to look into the folds of the new leaves, the undersides of old leaves and along the stem. Root disease is also a concern, especially in winter months when overwatering occurs quickly.

At retail and beyond

Before creating a planter, the Red Abyssinian should be thoroughly watered. One problem growers need to be aware of is that this plant often dries out much faster than the other plants around it, creating problems not only at the retail level, but also for the consumer at home.

Hardy to USDA Zone 9, this plant needs to be protected from frost. During the fall and winter months it can be taken indoors by the consumer, or placed in the greenhouse with a recommended minimum temperature of 54F (12C). As plant growth will be mostly inactive during this time, take care to prevent overwatering. Allow the plant to dry down slightly between watering to prevent root problems.

While the Red Abyssinian Banana, with its high demand for water, creates some difficulties in a planter, the appeal of the foliage makes the effort worthwhile. Its fast growth habit and dramatic presence in a container give it a much better value-added impression than the standard dracaena. Additionally, long after the spring season is over, the plant will continue to thrive in the home year after year. **GT**

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