Introduction

Banana Shrub is a dense, upright, evergreen shrub when young that eventually forms a rounded canopy (Fig. 1). It attains a height of 10 to 15 feet in sunny locations. It has lustrous, dark green foliage with brown hairs on the underside. Brown hairs cover the green twigs so densely that twigs appear brown. The fragrant, 1 1/2-inch-diameter, light-yellow flowers are edged in maroon and are magnolia-like in appearance. They last from spring until early summer and have a very interesting fragrance; they smell like ripening cantaloupes or bananas. This smell can be very pleasant but can be overwhelming when these shrubs are massed together. The bark of the Banana Shrub becomes a dark grayish-brown color with age.

General Information

Scientific name: *Michelia figo*
Pronunciation: my-KEEL-lee-uh FYE-go
Common name(s): Banana Shrub
Family: *Magnoliaceae*
Plant type: shrub
USDA hardiness zones: 7B through 10 (Fig. 2)
Planting month for zone 7: year round
Planting month for zone 8: year round
Planting month for zone 9: year round
Planting month for zone 10: year round
Origin: not native to North America
Uses: near a deck or patio; specimen; espalier; screen; border
Availability: generally available in many areas within its hardiness range

Description

Height: 10 to 20 feet
Spread: 6 to 15 feet
Plant habit: upright; pyramidal
Plant density: dense
Growth rate: moderate
Texture: medium
Foliage

Leaf arrangement: alternate
Leaf type: simple
Leaf margin: entire
Leaf shape: oblong
Leaf venation: pinnate
Leaf type and persistence: evergreen
Leaf blade length: 2 to 4 inches
Leaf color: green
Fall color: no fall color change
Fall characteristic: not showy

Flower

Flower color: yellow
Flower characteristic: pleasant fragrance; spring flowering

Fruit

Fruit shape: oval
Fruit length: less than .5 inch
Fruit cover: dry or hard
Fruit color: red

Fruit characteristic: inconspicuous and not showy

Trunk and Branches

Trunk/bark/branches: not particularly showy; typically multi-trunked or clumping stems; can be trained to grow with a short, single trunk
Current year stem/twig color: brown
Current year stem/twig thickness: medium

Culture

Light requirement: plant grows in part shade/part sun
Soil tolerances: acidic; sand; loam; clay;
Drought tolerance: moderate
Soil salt tolerances: unknown
Plant spacing: 36 to 60 inches

Figure 2. Shaded area represents potential planting range.
Other

Roots: usually not a problem
Winter interest: no special winter interest
Outstanding plant: plant has outstanding ornamental features and could be planted more
Invasive potential: not known to be invasive
Pest resistance: very sensitive to one or more pests or diseases which can affect plant health or aesthetics

Use and Management

Banana Shrub is generally used as a specimen and foundation plant and is well suited for planting in a large container. Older plants can be trained into small, multi-trunked trees with a vase shape. It is quite urban tolerant.

Michelia figo prefers a well-drained, acid, organic soil that is of medium fertility and moisture. It grows well in full sun or a mostly shaded location. Shaded plants grow taller than sun grown plants and develop a central leader with little pruning; whereas, sun grown plants often develop several trunks with a rounded to vase-shaped canopy.

Cultivars include: ‘Stubbs Purple’ - flowers more purple than the species; and ‘Port Wine’ - compact habit to about 6-feet-tall with more maroon in the flower than the species.

Propagate this plant by cuttings because the seeds are nonviable.

Pests and Diseases

Banana Shrub is relatively free of any pests or diseases. However, scales and mushroom rot may become a problem. A scale infestation can cause some defoliation.