



*With determination, this gardener created a tropical escape in the Northeast.*

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THE ENERGIZER Bunny has nothing on my husband, Jeff Hauck. He has always been interested in gardening, and constantly is adding trees, shrubs and flower beds to our yard. But I had my doubts the year he declared his plans to design a tropical garden near our backyard pool.

This may not sound difficult, except for the fact that we live in the Northeast and have a limited growing season. Nevertheless, Jeff dug into the project with dreams of creating a lush tropical-looking haven.

### Planning Paradise

It was a cold day in January when Jeff came home with the first plant for our garden—a Japanese fiber banana (*Musa basjoo*). He bought it because it's supposed to be the hardiest of all bananas and survive in -20° weather when properly mulched. As I looked at the meager plant, however, I was skeptical it would ever make it outside. Shortly after, two of the leaves on the plant died and three more turned brown.

Jeff kept working toward his paradise, though. He searched stacks of seed catalogs and made notes, trying to decide what other plants would add heat to our Pennsylvania version of the tropics. Meanwhile, the banana plant was perking up and slowly growing in the light of one of our windows.

In the spring, Jeff sowed a variety of summer poinsettia (*Amaranthus tricolor*) and vine seeds in a temporary area by our kitchen window. He then built several 6-foot cedar trellises and two raised beds around our pool.

### Tropical Test Run

The banana plant, now a proud 20 inches tall, was the first thing to go into the soil. Surrounding it were a mixture of hibiscus, cannas and calla lilies, as well as a sprinkling of annuals like pink and white cleomes and a border of vincas.

In the second bed, Jeff planted Persian shield, verbena and morning glories. By then, the newly sprouted seeds were ready to go. He added the summer poinsettias between the two beds and found spots for the vines—cardinal climber, hyacinth bean, moonflower, love-in-a-puff and Spanish flag—along the homemade trellises.

### Backyard Getaway

By midsummer, our tropical fantasy had become a reality. The true highlight was the banana plant. It grew 12 feet tall, and towered above the pool to create the perfect tropical setting. We spent many hours relaxing in the water, soaking up our spectacular view of paradise.

As soon as summer was over, Jeff was already making plans to improve our poolside retreat. He has his eye on an Arizona yucca, which resembles a small palm tree. He thinks it will be the perfect addition to the banana plant.

That's just how Jeff is...he keeps going and going!



**GROWING UP.** It was the unlikely centerpiece of Jeff Hauck's tropical backyard dream, but the banana plant (with Jeff, at top) thrived. Other plants, like cleome, hibiscus and summer poinsettia (above), and a variety of vines (right) complete their paradise.

