Magnolia figo (J. de Loureiro) C.P.J. Sprengel  

Banana-Shrub  

(Liriodendron figo, Magnolia fuscata, Michelia figo, Michelia fuscata)  

• This upright oval evergreen small tree, 7’ to 10’ (15’) tall, is valued for its handsome foliage and pleasant banana-scented flowers; leaves have narrowly elliptic to slender obovate blades with cuneate to acute bases, entire to slightly undulate margins, and acute tips; blades are (1½”) 2” to 3½” (4”) long; foliage emerges with a brownish pubescence present and gradually becomes nearly glabrous at maturity; petioles are typically short, less than ½” long and pubescent.  

• Flowers emit a wonderful fragrance but are rather hidden amongst the foliage; the 1” to 1½” diameter cup-shaped flowers are composed of six to nine tepals and range in color from a creamy white to yellowish green, sometimes with a hint of reddish or purplish blush at the base; flowering occurs rather sporadically from mid-spring to early summer; occasional fall flowering has been observed following hot dry summers, perhaps the plants were thrown into some sort of mid-summer dormancy.  

• Banana-Shrubs are an intriguing group of plants in the landscape, but most require a moist well drained humusy acid soil; this can be a challenge in much of the central and western portions of our region; flowers can also be damaged by late spring freezes in more northern portions of their useful range; the further north, the more sun they will tolerate, but M. figo and its close relatives will benefit from at least partial shade in much of our region; where other growing conditions can be met, M. figo is useful in USDA zones 8 (7) to 10.  

• Depending upon the authority followed, the genus Michelia L. is either a group of around 20 to 25 species or it is simply a subgroup within the larger genus Magnolia; functionally the flowering and in some respects the foliage and habits of this group of plants separate themselves from the typical Magnolia spp., so the debate will likely continue; the former genus name Michelia honors 18th century Florentine botanist Pietro Antonio Micheli.  

• Some authorities report the closely related Magnolia figo var. skinneriana (S.T. Dunn) H.P. Nootooboom (Michelia amoena, Michelia linyaoensis, Michelia skinneriana) to be more cold hardy in USDA zone 7 than the species type; this variety can be observed in several locations in Texas serving a similar function as the species type and may be preferable in colder locations.