

## Brooklyn Paper

### Bananas? In Brooklyn?

By Ben Muessig

Posted on April 5, 2008



When Williamsburg artist Ricci Albenda tried to grow bananas in his backyard, they didn't take root in the Devoe Street soil — but they flourished in his studio.

Albenda, 42, knew nothing about gardening when he moved into his first-floor apartment five years ago. But that didn't stop him from trying to grow bananas in Brooklyn's far-from-tropical climate.

OK, so his first banana tree perished.

"Maybe I did something wrong," Albenda said. "Or maybe the winters here are just too cold and wet." (Too cold for bananas? What gave him that idea?)

But Albenda didn't quit. He planted a second banana tree.

OK, so that tree didn't make it, either. But the banana failure led to successful efforts growing peaches, cherries, apples, blueberries, gooseberries, and even a miniature joshua tree.

Albenda's garden has provided more than produce — it's been the root stock for an entirely new body of work.

"When I first started working on the garden, I was working five hours a day and thinking about quitting being an artist and just opening a nursery," he said.s

Good thing he didn't. Last week, an exhibit of Albenda's art titled "26 Devoe" opened at the Horticultural Society of New York. The show includes text-based paintings that riff on gardening words like "helleborus," "actaea pachypoda," and "cotula."

The works don't only nourish the mind and the soul. They also hit you on a gut level.

"My peaches are wildly better than what you can get at a grocery store — there is no comparison," Albenda said. "All of the peaches are good, even the ones with bugs and rot. All you have to do is cut around the bugs and the rot and they're great."

True, Albenda's art and agricultural work is in full bloom, but not everything has worked out so well.

In addition to the now-legendary banana tree disaster, his lilacs never thrived in the city's polluted air, soil and water. And things are also not looking bright for his two-year-old kiwi tree, which has yet to flower or produce fruit.

Still, he's optimistic — so optimistic in fact, that he ordered two more banana trees this week.

"The Northeast is actually a great place to garden," he said. "It gets a lot of rainfall and the soil is good."

Ricci Albenda's "26 Devoe" runs through May 23 at the Horticultural Society of New York (148 W. 37th St., between Broadway and Seventh Avenue in Manhattan), 11 am–6 pm. Monday through Friday and by appointment. Call (212) 757-0915 or visit [www.hsnny.org](http://www.hsnny.org) for more information.