

Growing Your Own Fruit Trees

By

Stephen M. Schaub

Imagine growing an abundance of fresh fruit in your own back yard. Imagine having your own supply of delicious jams, jellies and pies, all made from fresh homegrown fruit, available to share with family and friends. You can do this. You can grow your own fruit trees successfully at home. It's an activity your family can enjoy working on together. It's yet another way of going green, because you'll be growing your own fruit, instead of paying to have it trucked in at the supermarket.

Depending on what you want, there are a variety of sizes available. The standard fruit tree can grow to 30 or 40 feet tall at maturity, and produce enormous amounts of fruit. But there are alternatives, such as the semi-dwarf varieties that will reach about 15 or 20 feet at maturity. A dwarf tree will be much smaller, 6 to 12 feet, and produce much less fruit. Though less productive, the smaller trees are also much easier to maintain.

Dwarf trees have some pros and cons compared to standard trees. They bear fruit at an earlier age and take up less space. The fruit is easier to harvest on small trees, and tree maintenance is more convenient. But they may be less hardy than standard trees, may produce less fruit than standard trees, and they may require staking to support their weaker structure.

A back yard is best for fruit trees, and an important requirement is a location that receives full sun. A fruit tree needs lots of sunshine to produce a crop. Fruit trees require more maintenance than other trees. They must be protected from deer and rabbits and mice, because these animals will eat the bark and kill the tree. Spraying with chemicals should be done at various times during the growing season, to protect against insects and plant diseases. Fruit trees should be pruned in late winter, and there is a technique to pruning. But all of these tasks are simple to learn, and anyone can learn to do it.

You don't absolutely need to spray for insects and disease. You could go 100% organic, but be prepared to see a corresponding reduction in the quality and quantity of the harvest, and perhaps a shorter life for the tree. If you do use pesticides, you must never spray when the trees are in bloom. This will kill the bees that pollinate the tree.

Some trees bear more fruit when you plant more than one, as this aids in pollination which will set more fruit on the tree. Even the self-pollinating varieties, which require no pollinator, will produce fruit if there's another fruit tree nearby.

Some fruit trees are easier to grow than others. Apples and pears are generally the most user-friendly. Cherries will not tolerate certain soil types, and most varieties of peaches prefer warm climates.

Plant apple trees as soon as possible in the spring. Some apple trees are self-pollinating and some aren't. It depends largely on what type of tree you buy. Apple trees will grow in almost any soil, but they require good water drainage to thrive. Most trees can be helped with the addition of some kind of organic matter such as compost.

Apple and pear trees have much the same requirements. Standard-size pear trees, just like apple trees, should be planted a minimum of 20 to 25 feet apart. Dwarf trees can be planted 15 to 20 feet apart. Keep in mind that while unripe pears can be stored, they do not store as well as apples, so you may need a method of preserving the harvest through canning or freezing.

As for plums, some trees are self-fertile and some aren't. Be sure to check before buying. They should be spaced 30 feet apart and usually bear one or two bushels of fruit. Their soil preference is just like that of apples and pears. Plum trees may require some pruning but not very much.

Apricots have shallow roots and require monitoring for moisture levels of the soil, and they do not like heavy clay soil. They can be planted about 20 feet apart. The yield per tree is about one or two bushels. They should be pruned to eliminate old growth that is no longer fruitful. There may be alternate years when the tree bears no fruit, and this can be attributed to overproduction the previous year which causes an energy drain on the plant. Fresh apricots do not store well, so be prepared to freeze or preserve the surplus.

Cherries are of two types: sweet and tart. The tart cherries are easier to grow than the sweet ones. Tart cherries are self-pollinating, but the sweet cherries will require another cherry tree as a pollinator. Cherries grow best in a sandy, loamy soil, and they do not like heavy wet soil. Cherry trees are spaced about 15 feet apart. Cherry yield can be improved by some pruning, but too much pruning slows the growth rate and reduces the yield. Birds will be attracted to cherries, and you will probably lose some fruit to the birds. A protective net is available to cover the entire tree if birds are a problem.

Grapes are another relatively easy-to-grow fruit. There are a variety of table grapes for the home gardener to consider, among them Concord, one of the most well-known. Grapes will grow in almost any type of soil, except perhaps for sandy soil, which drains water away too quickly. They should be planted in the spring, to give them a season to grow and establish their roots. They should be spaced five to eight feet apart in a sunny location. Grapes are self-pollinating, so one vine will produce fruit. Grapes generally average a yield of about four to six quarts per plant.

Berries are perhaps the simplest and easiest to grow. All that is required is a little maintenance. Raspberries and blackberries are expensive when bought in the store, but more economical when you grow your own. They grow best in a fertile soil, but will grow anywhere as long as there is adequate water drainage. And it also helps to have a sunny location with good air circulation to prevent the occurrence of fungus and other plant diseases. They should be planted in the spring, with raspberries two feet apart and blackberries three or four feet apart. The yield for these berries varies depending upon conditions, but averages about one to two quarts per plant. Some people prefer to tie the plant to a stake to better control its growth, while others prefer to plant them in a row and allow them to spread and thicken. It's all a matter of choice, with no one method better than another.

Blueberries, however, require certain specific growing conditions. They do poorly in heavy clay soil, owing to their delicate roots. They prefer a sandy loam. Planted in the spring, they can be spaced three to four feet apart. Some people overcome these requirements by planting blueberries in large containers filled with rich soil. They should be mulched to protect their delicate roots and watered regularly to protect them from drying out. Be aware that birds love blueberries too, and birds can become a problem. Here again, a protective netting is available to cover the blueberry plant and keep the birds out.

Talk to an expert nurseryman or arborist before making an investment in a fruit tree. Learn all you can on how to care for fruit trees – it will be time well spent. No other fruit has the flavor of fruit that you’ve grown in your own back yard. With just a little more effort on your part, you can enjoy an abundance of flavorful and healthy fruit all year long.

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Growing YOUR OWN Fruit Trees

A Cheaper, Fresher Path to Produce

By Stephen M. Schaub

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Types of Trees

Depending on what you want, there are a variety of sizes available. The standard fruit tree can grow to 30 or 40 feet tall at maturity, and produce enormous amounts of fruit. But there are alternatives, such as the semi-dwarf varieties that will reach about 15 or 20 feet at maturity. A dwarf tree will be much smaller, 6 to 12 feet, and produce much less fruit. Though less productive, the smaller trees are also much easier to maintain.





Pear Tree



Cherry Tree



Apricot Tree

Dwarf trees have some pros and cons compared to standard trees. They bear fruit at an earlier age, and take up less space. The fruit is easier to harvest on small trees, and tree maintenance is more convenient. But they may be less hardy than standard trees, produce less fruit than standard trees, and require staking to support their weaker structure.

The Ideal Setup

A back yard is best for fruit trees, and an important requirement is a location that receives full sun. A fruit tree needs lots of sunshine to produce a crop. Fruit trees require more maintenance than other trees. They must be protected from deer, rabbits and mice, because these animals will eat the bark and kill the tree. Spraying with chemicals should be done at various times during the growing season to protect against insects and plant diseases. Fruit trees should be pruned in late winter, and there is a technique to pruning. But all of these tasks are simple to learn; anyone can do it.

You don't absolutely need to spray for insects and disease. You could go 100% organic, but be prepared to see a corresponding reduction in the quality and quantity of the harvest, and perhaps a shorter life for the tree. If you do use pesticides, you must never spray when the trees are in bloom. This will kill the bees that pollinate the tree.

Some trees bear more fruit when you plant more than one, as this aids in pollination which will set more fruit on the tree. Even the self-pollinating varieties, which require no pollinator, will produce more fruit if there's another fruit tree nearby.

What Type of Fruit is Best For You

Some fruit trees are easier to grow than others. Apples and pears are generally the most user-friendly. Cherries will not tolerate certain soil types, and most varieties of peaches prefer warm climates than Central Illinois offers.

With apple trees, plant them as soon as possible in the spring. Some apple trees are self-pollinating and some aren't. It depends largely on what type of tree you buy. Apple trees will grow in almost any soil, but they require good water drainage to thrive. Most trees can be helped with the addition of some kind of organic matter, such as compost.

Apple and pear trees have much the same requirements. Standard-size pear trees, just like apple trees, should be planted a minimum of 20 to 25 feet apart. Dwarf trees can be planted 15 to 20 feet apart. Keep in mind that while unripe pears can be stored, they do not store as well as apples, so you may need a method of preserving the harvest through canning or freezing.

As for plums, once again, they can be self-fertilizers or not. They should be spaced 30 feet apart and typically bear one or two bushels of fruit. Their soil preference is just like that of apples and pears. Plum trees may require some pruning, but not very much.

Apricots have shallow roots and require monitoring for moisture levels of the soil, and they do not like heavy clay soil. Planting recommendations set at 20 feet apart. The yield per tree is about one or two bushels. They should be pruned to eliminate old growth that is no longer fruitful. There may be alternate years when the tree bears no fruit, and this can be attributed to overproduction the previous year which causes an energy drain on the plant. Fresh apricots do not store well, so be prepared to freeze or preserve the surplus.

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