

GETTING STARTED WITH FRUIT TREES



PLAN AHEAD What fruit do you like to eat? What do you want to do with the fruit? Do you have a good location for the tree? Is the location: sunny, well drained, and accessible from all sides, free of competition from other trees and plants, and more than 50' from any walnut tree (walnut roots are toxic to some plants)? Read several descriptions of the variety that interests you to find out both its good and bad features. Don't plant more than you can take care of, especially when the trees are young and becoming established.

SMALL TREES (OR SHRUBS) ARE THE WAY TO GO!!

Smaller sized trees generally bear fruit quicker, are easier to care for, easier to pick fruit from, don't take up so much room, and are safer to pick from. Some varieties of fruit trees are naturally dwarf or semi-dwarf, whereas other varieties become dwarf when grafted onto rootstocks that inhibit their growth. How much the growth is inhibited by a given rootstock varies a lot depending on the variety, so read the catalog or tag description before buying to get an idea what the mature size will be.

CLIMATE ZONES—read the description of the tree to find out if it will grow here!

The smaller the zone number, the colder is the average annual winter-minimum temperature. Not all fruit varieties are able to survive extreme cold. The Twin Cities are generally zone 4, but there are many microclimate areas here that are zone 5. The area surrounding the Twin Cities is mostly zone 4. Further north of the Twin Cities is climate zone 3.

THE FIRST SEASON

The roots of bare root trees should be soaked in water for 2-12 hours before planting. Plant the tree in a hole wide enough and deep enough to accommodate the roots without bending them or crowding them together. Make sure that the graft union is above the ground surface and that the roots are buried. Water thoroughly at planting time so that there are no air pockets underground. During dry weather, make sure that the new tree gets at least 1" of water per week, up until the ground freezes late in the year. Put an organic mulch around the tree, leaving a few inches clear around the trunk. Do not fertilize during the first season.

THEREAFTER

Spring fertilizing may or may not be called for in subsequent years. To prevent lush growth of tender cold-sensitive sprouts in the fall, never fertilize after mid-August. Remember that small trees naturally grow slowly. Prune only as needed. Water deeply whenever the soil becomes excessively dry. Keep the surrounding ground free of weeds. Continue to use mulch that will slowly decompose, maintain moisture, and add to the soil's fertility.

Some general hints regarding pruning:

You should cut off all sprouts that come up from at the base. In the canopy, branches rubbing together will wear the bark off--prune one of the branches back. Cut off larger branches to just above the branch collar. Small twigs can be cut ½" beyond a bud. Don't prune too much at a time! The more that you cut off, the more the tree responds by putting out more growth. Then you end up cutting off even more in the future to keep the tree within bounds.

Pruning in late winter is ideal, but---in the summer:

If a branch breaks, cut it back to reduce the chances of infection. If the branch is growing alarmingly long, shorten it to a reasonable length so it doesn't tear off under its own weight. Do summer pruning when rain is not in the forecast for a few days. This reduces the likelihood of infection. All wounds in the bark increase the possibility of infection, whether the wound opening is made by you or by nature. You have to decide whether to summer prune or wait until late winter.

Excess fruits must be thinned!! Especially on young trees!! Too much heavy fruit will permanently bend down the thin flexible branches or even break them. Too much heavy fruit can bend over an entire young tree. Some apple varieties will not bear at all the year following a heavy crop; thinning the fruit promotes annual production.

Winter care

Rabbits, voles, and deer love to eat the bark and branches of fruit trees. Therefore, before snow covers the ground wrap the trunk with tree wrap, or use a 4' tall cage made of chicken wire or 1/4" hardware cloth (dissuades voles). If the branches are rubbing against the top of the cage, then it would be better to wrap the trunk. If the trunk is not wrapped with tree wrap, then paint the trunk with white latex paint so as to reflect sunlight and prevent the premature rising of

sap. Risen sap can freeze at night and split the bark and tender tissues of the trunk. If deer are present the branches should be sprayed with repellent. This may need to be done more than once during the winter. Since deer can become accustomed to the smell of a repellent it is best to alternate amongst different kinds.

APPLES

There are hundreds of varieties to choose from. There are varieties that are resistant to several diseases: some of these apples are Freedom, Liberty, Macfree, Novamac, Priscilla, and William's Pride. All apples are vulnerable to insect damage. Avoid the need to spray for insects by bagging each apple shortly after petal drop with a zip lock bag (with corners clipped) or a nylon footie. Most apples need to be cross-pollinated, but any nearby apple or crabapple will do, as long as it blooms at the same time as your tree. Check for pollen sterility issues in the plant description.

PEACHES

Cold-hardy peach varieties that can grow in this area: Bailey's Hardy, Contender, and Reliance. Others to investigate: Carolina Gold, China Pearl, Harrow Beauty, Harrow Diamond, Madison, & White Knight. Dwarfing varieties to investigate: Empress, Golden Glory, and Golden Prolific. Peaches are generally self-pollinating. Birds like to eat peaches as much as we do. Bagging of individual fruit may be the best protection against birds as the trees (except patio dwarves) are too large to net easily. Plum curculio and Japanese beetles can mar the fruit, and bagging may be effective against them. Peaches should be thinned while the fruit is small, especially on young trees.

PEARS

Pears have many of the same care characteristics as apples, but are not as affected by insects. However, they are even more affected by the disease called fire blight. Fire blight resistant varieties include: Harrow Sweet, Honeysweet (self-pollinating), Kieffer, Magness (partially self-pollinating), Moonglow, Old Home, Seckel (natural dwarf). Aphids can be controlled by horticultural oil sprayed in the winter. Codling moths can be excluded by bagging. Pears require another variety for pollination—check for compatibility. Pears (except for Seckel) should be grafted to dwarfing Old Home rootstock—even semi-dwarf trees can get quite large.

PLUMS

Plum trees need to be cross-pollinated by a variety of the same type—European plums vs Japanese/American plums. European plum trees on a dwarfing rootstock are 8-10' x 8-10'. The fruits have blue or purple skin and yellow flesh. Common varieties like Stanley and Damson are zone 5 hardy and only marginally hardy here. Japanese/American plum crosses like Superior, Toka, Pembina, Waneta, Prairie Red, and Pipestone are hardy in zone 4 and do well in Minnesota. Semi-dwarf trees will get to be about 10-12' tall and wide. Plum curculio insects and Japanese beetles are pests of plums. It is suggested that Surround kaolin spray can help control plum curculio. It is possible that spotted wing fruit flies (*Drosophila*) may damage plums. Check with the latest UMN publications for more information.

CHERRY TREES Some varieties are self-pollinating but all varieties will produce more with another variety nearby. Naturally dwarf/semi-dwarf pie cherries for zone 4 are North Star, Meteor, and Evans/Bali. Sweet cherries for zone 4 are Kristin and Lapins. Gisela 5 is a dwarfing rootstock for these. Netting is the best way to keep birds from getting most of the crop. Spotted wing fruit flies (*Drosophila*) may attack cherries. Check with the latest UMN publications.

BUSH CHERRIES

In 1999 the University of Saskatchewan introduced a new type of bush cherry called Carmine Jewel. In 2004 they introduced the Romance Series of bush cherries: Juliet, Crimson Passion, Valentine, Romeo, and Cupid. These cherry varieties are tart, but the Romance Series varieties also have a high sugar content. They may be planted deep enough that extra buds which are below the ground surface can re-sprout should a hungry rabbit decapitate the top. A cage big enough to surround these bushes would have to be quite wide. Bush cherries may need to be netted to dissuade birds.

JUNE BERRIES, (aka SERVICE BERRY, SHADBUSH, SASKATOON, or AMELANCHIER)

Juneberries are North American natives high in vitamins and minerals. Varieties range in size from 4' tall to 25' tall and are very hardy. This fruit resembles blueberries in appearance and somewhat in taste, but the plants are easier to grow. Unlike blueberries, Juneberries do not require acid soil. They may need to be netted to dissuade birds. Some shorter varieties: Northline (produces suckers), Smoky, Prince William, Lee #8, Nelson, Parkhill, Pembina, and Regent. Most varieties are self-pollinating, but all varieties will produce more with another variety nearby.

Happy Gardening,
Jennifer Porwit

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