

Can I Grow Apricots in the Pacific Northwest?

If you have ever eaten a tree ripened Apricot, you will probably want to try to grow them. There are lucky individuals throughout the Pacific Northwest who have a bearing Apricot in their orchard or garden. The trees are beautiful as ornamentals, and the fruit ripening in July and August are worth the trouble.



Can you grow Apricots in your garden? The answer is 'maybe'. Apricots are the most difficult tree fruit to successfully grow in our maritime climate. Why? Apricots are best suited to climates with consistently cold winters and short dry springs. A short period in winter with daytime temperatures in the high 40's or low 50's (which happens most winters) can cause Apricots to break dormancy and come into bloom. Data from the stone fruit trials at the WSU Mount Vernon Fruit Research Station shows Puget Gold Apricot in full bloom anywhere from March 16 to April 8 in the years 1999-2004. Once the tree has begun bloom, its blossoms are susceptible to frost damage. Even a light frost can cause some loss of fruit.

Site selection is very important for growing Apricots. If you live in a valley bottom where cold air settles, you probably have frequent late frosts. This kind of site will not be very successful with apricots. But, if you live on a slope with good air drainage, or very close to a large body of water (which can keep the air warmer), you may have a site where Apricots will thrive. The soil needs to be well drained, and if you have a site that gets winter shade (such as on the north side of tall trees) but summer sun, that is even better, as the winter shade will help keep your Apricot tree dormant even longer. Some Apricot fans go the extra distance for their fruit fix- by growing their Apricot tree under a deep eave or in a greenhouse or tunnel to protect the tree from frost and rain. Putting a tarp over your apricot tree from bud swell on will help protect the blossoms from frost. You could also string small Christmas lights along the branches that can be turned on during frosty spells to warm the air around the blossoms and prevent frost damage.

So, you have a good site, and want to try. Be aware that Apricots also will need some spraying to be successful. Apricots are subject both to *pseudomonas*, or bacterial canker, and to brown rot, which can cause the fruit to rot before it ripens. A delayed dormant spray of copper and oil, applied at blossom stage 1-2 should be followed by a copper spray (no oil) as the flowers open, and another at full bloom. A new biological fungicide, Serenade, is also somewhat effective against brown rot.

Apricots can be grown in an open vase shape, much like plums or dwarf cherries. At planting, prune the tree to 3-5 evenly spaced branches around the trunk, shortening these branches to 18-24" pruned to an outward facing bud. In subsequent years, prune to keep the tree open to light and air circulation, or to remove damaged or diseased wood. Always prune during dry weather- at least 48 hours of no rain after the cuts are made. This will minimize chance of bacterial infection in the pruning cut.