

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 one of 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. Temperatures below 28°F can cause the loss of the whole crop.



Icicle lights on a thermal switch protect the blossom buds from hard freezes. The lights turn on at 35° and back off when the temperature rises to 40°.

Site Selection

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 (not LED) along the branches that can be turned on during frosty spells to warm the air around the blossoms and prevent frost damage.

Pest & Diseases

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. Biological fungicides, like Serenade or Monterey Complete Disease Control, are also somewhat effective against brownrot and can be sprayed post-bloom.

Apricot trees have few insect pests in our area, but aphids can be a problem in the summer. The oil in the dormant spray can help smother overwintering aphid eggs. If aphids appear in the summer, wash them off with a strong jet of water, or spray with horticultural soap.

Pruning

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. The optimal time for pruning is after bloom.

Other Culture

Like all fruit trees, apricot trees need some supplemental water in the summer to produce quality fruit. Keeping the ground free of grass and weeds around the tree's roots can help reduce water use. Apply a thin mulch to conserve moisture.

Apricots prefer a neutral soil, so applying lime in the fall annually can help keep the soil pH up from our naturally acidic pH. Young trees can benefit from a good fruit tree fertilizer in the spring. Once trees are established and growing vigorously, added nitrogen is usually not needed, but micronutrients found in product like Azomite and Sul-po-mag can help with flower bud formation.

Harvest

Apricots are ready to pick when the fruit turns golden-orange and has a sweet smell. The fruit should still be firm, but not hard.