

Growing Fruit Trees: The First 3 Years

Getting Started with Fruit Trees

Some things to consider:

- Fruit varieties
 - Easiest are plums and Asian pears; pests and disease pressures are low in our climate and allow you to minimize spraying.
 - Second easiest are apples and European pears; these do need a little more disease and pest management but are still easy in most planting sites.
- What kind fruit do you want to grow? When do you want it ripe? Because fruit trees do take maintenance throughout the year, make sure you are ready to take on the work, and that it is worth your time. If you never buy or eat apples, you probably won't be motivated to grow them.

Do you have a suitable site for fruit trees? Some things to check out before buying trees:

- **Drainage**- Dig a hole where you want to plant, 16" deep, in the winter. If water fills the hole and stands in the hole more than 36 hours, you will need to mound up the planting site. You want to build a 3'-5' wide mound with 16" to the water level.
- **Sunlight**- fruit trees need as a minimum, $\frac{3}{4}$ of a day (6-8 hours) of good sunlight. If your site is shady before 4pm in mid-summer, it is probably too shady to produce good fruit.

What do rootstocks do?

- Almost all fruit trees are grafted: a select variety of fruit onto a selected rootstock.
 - In general, smaller rootstocks fruit earlier than larger rootstocks
 - In general, smaller rootstocks need staking
 - Larger rootstocks are more tolerant of marginal soil, and slightly more drought tolerant when established
- Rootstock helps determine **Tree size**
 - How much room do you have?
 - How high on a ladder do you want to climb?
 - **Tree Spacing**- Remember there are size options because of rootstocks. Larger trees need wider spacing, smaller trees can be closer together.

Pollination- what does that mean? All fruit trees need to have pollen moved to the anthers of their flowers by a pollinating insect for that flower to become a fruit.

- Many fruit trees are self-sterile, and need a second variety nearby to provide pollen to set fruit
- Some stone fruit are self-fertile and do not need a pollinizer- their own flower's pollen will work to set fruit

What to look for in purchasing a tree?

- Bud union of the graft should be firm and clean
- Tree is tagged with variety and rootstock
- Thumb nail test- if you scratch a branch, is the wood underneath the scratch green?
- Will you need to permanently stake this tree? (dwarf rootstocks)

Planting Requirements: Are you ready to take care of your trees?

- Soil isn't too wet to work, or you have built a mound

- Planting- when planting, be sure to keep the graft union 2"-4" above soil line
- Root care-Prune broken roots off, spread out over soil mound
- Water trees in, and have a plan for watering during the summer
- Tree support and tie- even semi-dwarf trees need staking 1st year

Fertilizer and lime

- Young fruit trees benefit from fertilizer the first 3 years to stimulate growth. In sandy or gravelly soils, they may need fertilizer past 3 years.
- Western WA soils are typically acidic, and fruit trees prefer a neutral pH Liming at planting and annually in the fall will help sweeten the soil and provide calcium for good fruit production



Prune broken and long roots before planting



Spread the roots in the hole



Graft union 2"-4" above soil

Prune at Planting

- Apples and pears can be pruned when you plant. Follow then handouts available at the nursery for initial pruning info
- Stone fruit- prune after they break dormancy/bloom when weather is dry, no rain at least 48 hours after pruning cuts are made. Follow pruning handouts for each fruit type.

Year 1-Post Planting

- Keep soil moist, keep weed free area, 3'-4' diameter
- Insects and disease-watch for mildew, scab, leaf rollers, aphids, pear slug. Most diseases aren't hard to manage in the first 2 years with 2 sprays per year. 1st pre-bloom and 2nd post bloom.

- If terminal shoots stop growing, it is one of three things usually. Not enough water, mildew (silvery gray or dead looking tips on branch ends.), or tree is deficient in nutrients. Lime and compost additions in years 1 and 2.
- Remove all but 2-4 fruits first year

Year 2-3

- **Prune** apples and pears in dormant season (Before leaves come out). Prune peaches, plums and cherries after bloom.
- Review Cloud Mountain **Disease and Pest Management in the Home Orchard** handout, available on website and at nursery.
- **New growth**- if growth is less than 18" per year average per shoot then the tree might be lacking water and/or nutrients
- **Keep 3'-4' area clean** around trees first 7-8 years so voles/field mice don't eat your tree's roots.
- **Watering 1"** per week in the growing season is a good rule of thumb. Heavier soils may need less water, sandy soils more.
 - **Check** the soil moisture level to make sure you are watering enough: 24 hours after watering, dig 6"-8" down and make sure soil is moist!
- **Train new shoots** in late summer
- **Fruit**- leave up to 6 fruit, remove all at ends of branches

Year 3

- Same as year 2, but more of everything, including fruit.
- Come to advanced Fruit Growing Classes

Getting Started: Perennial, Shrub & Cane Fruit

Maybe in addition to fruit trees, you'd like to plant other perennial fruiting plants: blueberries, cane fruit, currants & gooseberries, kiwi, grapes, and strawberries. To get off to a good start:

- Blueberries are shallow, fibrous rooted plants. To grow well, they need-
 - Organic rich soil- work in rotted compost, sawdust (not cedar) or bark mulch to improve the soil
 - **NO** competition from grass or weeds- keep the beds clean
 - Consistent moisture- even established blueberries need summer water
 - Minimum of 6 hours of sun in the summer for sweet fruit
 - Plant 3'-5' apart
 - Plant at least 2 varieties for pollination unless marked Self-Fertile
 - Feed with a fertilizer formulated for acid loving plants
- Cane Fruit: Blackberries and Raspberries
 - Blackberries are tolerant of most soils
 - Raspberries need well drained soil: build raised beds if your soil is at all wet in winter
 - Blackberries and summer raspberries need a trellis: they grow a cane one year and that cane flowers and fruits the second year. A trellis provides support for the year old canes. Fall bearing raspberries fruit on first year canes and can be grown without trellising.
 - Plant raspberries and blackberries very shallowly, barely cover the roots.
 - Keep watered well during summer
 - Cane fruit need a minimum of 6 hours of sun in summer.
- Gooseberries/Currants
 - Tolerant of many soils except very wet ones.

- Tolerant of some summer shade, can fruit with as little as 4-5 hours of summer sun
- Need renewal pruning (removal/thinning) of older canes to keep fruiting
- Plant 4'-6' apart
- Strawberries
 - Need sandy, well-drained soil, amended with compost
 - Keep beds well-watered in summer
 - Fertilize in late summer
 - Plant main crop varieties 15"-24" apart in rows 30"-36" apart
 - Pinch all blossoms the first season to encourage root establishment
 - Allow runners to fill in to create a row 18"-24" wide by pinning runners every 6"-8".
 - Plant day-neutral (everbearing) varieties 10"-18" apart in rows 30"-36" apart.
 - Pinch first set of blossoms to encourage roots.
 - Allow 1 runner between each plant if planted on the wider spacing. Cut off all other runners
- Kiwis
 - Need well drained soil and summer moisture
 - Need sturdy trellising
 - Need 6 hours of summer sun
 - Fuzzy varieties need some winter wrapping of trunks to prevent splitting
 - Male cultivars are needed for pollination: 1 male per 6-8 female plants. Male must be from the same group (fuzzy, arguta) as the females as the groups bloom at different times.
 - Female vines need 6'-8' of trellis length per plant
 - See our kiwi handout for pruning methods



Hardy Kiwi

- Grapes
 - Need well drained, lean soil
 - Need all day sun, no shade
 - Need sturdy trellis support
 - Are drought tolerant once established
 - See our grape handouts for pruning and training methods