



A Fruit Tree for Your Yard?

By Dawn Pettinelli, UConn Home & Garden Education Center

Not only has there been continued enthusiasm for growing one's own vegetables, but interest in planting small fruits and tree fruits has also been booming. Small fruits, like strawberries and blueberries are pretty easily accommodated in many yards but tree fruits require a bit more space and often more efforts with pest control.

Apples, pears, peaches, nectarines, apricots, plums, and cherries all have varieties that would do well in Connecticut's climate. Think about which fruit(s) you and your family enjoy the most. Review descriptions of the various cultivars. Maybe even sample some from the grocery store or farmers market, if possible. Usually this is easier done with apples and pears than other tree fruits since both are typically sold by variety name.

Also, think about what you want to do with your harvest. Would it be for fresh eating, baking, making jams and jellies, or drying? How would you store and use bountiful harvests? Consider the timing of the harvest. Most tree fruits have varieties that ripen early, mid-season or late. It may not make sense to have peaches ripening in August while you are on vacation.

In general, selection choice seems to be greatest for apples, followed by pears, peaches and plums with fewer apricot, nectarine, and cherry varieties hardy in this area. Do check varieties for hardiness. Much of Connecticut falls into the USDA hardiness zone 6 but northern and north western parts are often categorized as zone 5 while those in coastal and southern Connecticut may be zone 7. It makes sense to purchase fruit trees from a local garden center or nursery as they are most likely to carry the cultivars that are hardy in your area.

Keep in mind that some fruit trees require another cultivar for cross pollination so unless your neighbor has say an apple or pear tree, you would need to plant two different varieties for pollination to occur and fruit to be produced. Peaches and tart cherries are self-fruitful but just about all other tree fruits need a cross pollinator and it is important that their bloom times

overlap or pollination cannot occur. Local garden center staff should be able to pair up compatible varieties for you.



Basket of peaches. Photo by D. Pettinelli

Once you have decided what kind of fruit tree you want to plant, make sure there is a suitable site for it in your yard. Tree fruit need a minimum of 6 to 8 hours of direct sunlight each day, the more the better. If at all possible, plant on a north facing slope as that siting encourages slightly later blooms. This is especially valuable when a period of unseasonably warm weather occurs and the buds start to open only to get injured or killed by a more seasonable frost. Avoid planting fruit trees in low-lying or other frost prone areas.

Another consideration is space needed for the tree to mature. Often there are dwarf, semi-dwarf and standard varieties of tree fruits. As a general rule of thumb, space dwarf trees at about 8 to 10 feet apart, semi-dwarfs at 15 to 20 feet apart and standards 25 to 40 feet apart. Regular pruning can also control the size of a tree to some extent. Dwarfs produce fruit the quickest, often in just a year or two, while it might take 4 or more years for a standard fruit tree to start producing as it needs to attain a certain degree of maturity.

A fruit tree cultivar is typically grafted onto a root stock that imparts other desirable characteristics such as hardiness and plant size. This graft union is visible near the base of the trunk and should be left 2 to 3 inches above the soil level when planting.

Soils should be well-drained, moderately fertile and with a pH in the mid 6s. It is always a good idea to have the soil tested before planting. Most fruit tree roots grow in the top 18 inches of soil so prepare the site for these long lived plants well.

A last consideration when choosing a fruit tree is pest control. Some fruit have more disease and insect problems than others and it would be wise to look into common problems and their control.

While there is nothing like biting into that sun-warmed ripe peach, fruit trees are a long term commitment, Knowing what their needs are and being able to provide for them will insure a bountiful, delicious harvest.

If you have questions about growing fruit trees or on other gardening topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.