

Bulletin #2411, Planting and Early Care of Fruit Trees

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Planting and Early Care of Fruit Trees

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Fruit trees can be an attractive and useful addition to the home landscape. This fact sheet will help you to establish new fruit trees that will provide you with beauty and fruit for years to come.



When to Plant

Fruit trees may be planted in early spring, as soon as the frost in the ground has thawed. If the soil is very waterlogged, it is best to wait until it drains. Wait until the soil no longer comes up in sticky clumps that stick to the shovel.

The climate of New England is too cold for fall planting of fruit trees. Fall-planted trees will not have any advantage in growth over trees planted the following spring. Fall-planted trees may also be damaged in the winter months by rodents, deer or severe low temperatures.

Bare-root nursery stock is usually less expensive and will establish and grow well, if planted in April or early May. If you must hold the trees a short time before planting, store them in a cool, shady place where they will be out of the sun and wind. Pack the roots in moist sawdust or sphagnum moss to prevent them from drying out. Potted or ball-and-burlap trees are preferable for planting dates in late May or early June.

Digging the Hole

Select a site with direct sunlight. Allow enough room between the planting site and buildings, trees, power lines or other obstructions for the tree to fill its space when full grown.

Tree size varies with different species and the rootstock that the tree is on. The nursery where you bought the tree can advise you as to how much space the tree will need when full grown.

Fruit trees are tolerant of a fairly wide range of soil types, but the soil should be well-drained, with a minimum of 18 inches of soil above any ledge or hardpan.

Plant the tree deep enough so that the graft union is two to three inches above the ground. This planting depth will keep dwarf and semi-dwarf trees from growing into standard-sized trees.

Start by cutting through the sod in a circle that is about a foot wider than the diameter of the root ball. Roll the sod out of the hole and discard it or use it to cover a place where you want grass. Then dig a hole wide enough to allow the root system to fit without roots wrapping around the edge of the hole in a circle. Dig the hole deep enough to allow the tree to be planted with the graft union two to three inches above ground. This planting depth is critical for trees on dwarf or semi-dwarf rootstocks. If the tree is planted too deep and the graft union is below the soil line, the scion variety will form roots and the tree will become a standard-sized tree.

Filling the Hole

What should you put in the planting hole? Only roots, clean soil and water! Never put any fertilizer in the planting hole. If the soil is poor, you can mix in peat moss or thoroughly conditioned compost before filling the hole. A ratio of up to 50/50 peat to soil may be beneficial.

Trim off any broken or damaged roots before planting. Place the tree in the hole, and after making sure that the depth is correct, fill the hole with clean topsoil. It is helpful at this stage to have someone hold the tree straight while the hole is being filled. Pack the soil in the hole by gently stamping it with your feet. After the hole is filled, water the tree with two to five gallons of water, poured slowly enough so that the water doesn't run off.

Care and Pruning

All newly planted fruit trees will benefit from being staked. This will result in a straighter tree with more growth. Staking is especially important for trees planted on a wind-blown site and for dwarf fruit trees. Consider a strong permanent stake for dwarf fruit trees.

After the tree has started to grow (in about two weeks) you can apply a nitrogen fertilizer. Apply one ounce of actual nitrogen in a 12-inch circle around the base of the tree, and make sure the tree is well-watered after fertilizing. All nitrogen fertilizer should be applied before mid-June. Late application of nitrogen can lead to late-season growth, and the tree may not harden off in time to withstand winter.

Watering the new tree is important to help get it started, especially in the first few weeks after planting. A good rule is to apply five gallons of water around the base of the tree every week of the growing season in which there is less than an inch of rainfall.

Apples and pears are usually trained as central leader or cone-shaped trees. If the tree is an unbranched "whip," prune the stem to a height of 30 to 36 inches above the soil line. This will stimulate the buds just below the cut to grow. The top bud will grow vertically and form the leader, or trunk of the tree. The next one or two buds can be rubbed off with the fingers to prevent them from competing with the leader.

The buds that grow out below the top two or three should be retained to form the scaffold branches. Remove branches that grow out below a height of 18 inches from the ground. Bend the branches that remain to an angle of 45 to 65 degrees from vertical using clothespins, toothpicks or small weights. This keeps these branches from growing so strongly that they compete with the leader, and it stimulates flower production.

Stone fruit trees (peaches, plums) are usually trained as open-center (vase-shaped) trees. Two or three side branches are selected, and the remainder of the tree is cut off just above the top branch. Contact your county Extension office for other bulletins on training and pruning fruit trees.

Weed Control

Weeds compete with young trees for water and nutrients. A weed-free zone should be established at the base of the tree that extends out to form a circle with a diameter of two to three feet. Mulch, herbicide or cultivation may be used to prevent weeds.

Pest Management

Managing disease and insects usually doesn't become a big challenge until the trees begin to fruit. Newly planted trees need to be protected against attack by leaf-feeding insects, such as [gypsy moths](#) and [Japanese beetles](#). Inspect the trees on a regular basis to see if there is fresh damage, and contact your [University of Maine Cooperative Extension county office](#) for help in identifying and controlling any pests you find.

Apple trees can become infected with a fungus disease, scab, that damages both leaves and fruit. Control of scab is very important when the trees come into bearing. However, in severe cases, young, non-bearing trees can become defoliated by scab. This can stunt the trees and delay fruiting.

Protect the tree trunk against girdling by rodents. Spiral mouse guards, made of white plastic, are a popular and inexpensive option. The white color helps prevent winter injury to the trunk. However, this type of mouse guard should be removed during the summer and re-fitted in the fall to prevent it from becoming a safe haven for trunk-boring insects, such as the round-headed apple borer. An alternative solution is to paint the trunk with white interior latex paint and wrap the trunk with an 18-inch tall piece of galvanized hardware cloth. This type of mouse guard doesn't need to be removed in summer.

Deer can cause major damage to young fruit trees by feeding on the developing shoots and leaves in summer, and by browsing the fruit buds in winter. While repellents, such as small bars of hand soap, or small cloth bags of human hair, can deter hungry deer, sturdy fencing is the only long-term solution to possible deer damage.

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