



Growing Tree Fruits at Home



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Michigan-grown tree fruits harvest begins in July with apricots and sweet cherries and ends in October with apples and pears.

Locally grown tree fruits such as apricots, cherries, apples, peaches and pears are available beginning in midsummer through the fall. Customers love them because of their superior flavor and freshness. As a result of this delightful experience, some home gardeners are encouraged to plant their own backyard orchards. If you are considering growing your own fruits, making some preparations before planting will improve your chances of success.



The first consideration is the site. A minimum of eight hours of direct sunlight is required to grow top quality fruits. Light-textured soils such as sandy loams are ideal, but heavier soils with some clay can be suitable as long as they drain well. Standing water on the surface or in

the planting hole is unacceptable. The pH, which is a measure of the acidity or alkalinity of the soil, is also important. Fruit trees grow well in soil with a pH between 6 and 7.

A source of clean water for irrigation is also a priority. Your plantings will need irrigation during establishment and fruit production.

Most people do not consider protecting their investment from animals such as deer, rabbits and birds. Bucks may rub newly planted trees and will continually trim new growth if it's not protected. Rabbits will gnaw the bark off of young trees, and birds love to eat cherries. Barriers such as netting and fences will be necessary to preserve your produce.

There are a number of things to consider when purchasing trees. The first decision is whether to buy locally from a garden center or place an order via a nursery catalog or online. Buying locally has its advantages. You can examine the trees before purchasing, and in most cases a garden center will have larger plants available than you can get

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by mail order. Select well-branched trees with wide angles where branches meet the trunk.

One disadvantage of buying locally is that the prices can be higher than those you might find in a commercial fruit catalog. Also, the selection of varieties may be limited depending on how much space is allotted to fruit trees in the nursery area. When ordering from catalog companies that specialize in fruits, you have a greater selection of cultivars to choose from, but you will also have to decide what rootstock you want and available tree trunk caliper. Cultivar selections can be made on the basis of flavor, fruit size, yield potential, plant disease resistance, growth habit, pollination requirements and qualities for processing.

If you want to grow recently released varieties, order early. If possible, submit your order six months before you plan to plant. This will greatly improve the chance that the plants will be in stock, especially the new varieties and those on the most dwarfing rootstocks.

When placing the order, remember to provide information on when the plants should be shipped — otherwise, the company will send the order when it thinks it is appropriate for your area.

When the plants arrive, open the package and examine everything. Moisten the roots and store plants in the shade until planting time. If you are not satisfied with the condition of the plants, send a note to the company. If the plants die later, notifying the company on receipt of the plants should make getting a refund (if the company offers one) less difficult.

If weather conditions are not good for planting, place bare-root plants in pots or heel them into the ground. This will buy some time until the weather is more favorable. To heel in, place the trees at a 45-degree angle in a trench deep enough to cover the roots, and cover with soil or peat. Try to plant within two weeks.

Well before planting, test the soil to determine what nutrients need to be added for optimal growth. Visit the MSU Extension Bookstore (www.bookstore.msue.msu.edu) for information on a soil testing kit.

Plant as soon as the soil can be worked — usually in late April to May. Stake trees, especially those on dwarfing rootstocks, and apply a wood chip mulch to a depth of 4 inches (except next to the trunk) to control weeds and to protect trees from lawn mower damage.

After planting, begin selecting the branches to train the new trees to carry the future fruit. For additional information on tree fruit management, visit the Gardening in Michigan Web site at migarden.msu.edu or home orchard videos at <http://ce.ingham.org/Horticulture.aspx>.

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