

## **Why Fruit Trees Fail to Bear**

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Did your fruit tree fail to bear fruit this year? What was the cause and how can you prevent it from happening again in the future?

A number of conditions can result in trees not bearing fruit. Some you can control, and some you cannot.

Your tree might not be old enough. Fruit trees only produce after sufficient root growth, leaf production, and development of branches. Apple, apricot and sour cherry trees usually bear fruit within 3 to 5 years after planting. Pear and plum trees bear within 4 to 6 years, and sweet cherries bear within 5 to 7 years. Dwarf fruit trees usually bear 1 to 2 years earlier than standard-sized trees.

If your tree was covered with blossoms in the spring but did not set fruit, poor pollination might be the problem. Does your tree need a cross-pollinizer? Many fruit trees (including apples, pears, most sweet cherries, and Japanese and American plums) require pollination by another variety of the same or a similar species. To pollinate each other, fruit trees must bloom at the same time and be planted within 50 to 100 feet of each other.

Poor pollination can also result from inadequate insect activity, primarily by bees, around your fruit trees. To encourage bees to visit, plant a wide variety of flowers in your garden and avoid using pesticides, especially when plants are in bloom. If low bee activity is due to cool weather, there might be little you can do. Mason bees, which become active earlier in spring, might be a solution and can be purchased seasonally through local nurseries.

Did your tree not have many blossoms this year? This might result from a heavy crop last year. Apricots and plums should be thinned so that fruit are 2 to 4 inches apart on a branch. Apples and pears should be thinned to 1 to 2 fruits per cluster spaced 6 to 8 inches apart on the branch.

Extremely cold winter temperatures can kill dormant flower buds. Sweet cherry, peach and apricot trees are more susceptible to cold temperatures than apple, pear, plum or sour cherry trees. Since you cannot control the weather, plant fruit trees suited to your climate.

Did we have a late frost? As fruit trees break dormancy and buds begin to swell, they become more susceptible to cold temperatures. If your trees are budding out and a heavy frost is expected, consider covering them with floating row cover or old bed sheets. Hanging incandescent or Christmas tree lights under the cover can offer additional protection.

Good tree health is necessary for good fruit production. Fruit trees need full sunlight. Water them deeply but at infrequent intervals. Do not over-fertilize them, especially with nitrogen, since excess fertilizer can cause abundant foliage growth at the expense of fruit production. Reduce competition from weeds or grass by cultivation, mulching, or the application of herbicides around the base of the tree. (Check herbicide labels for those that can be used around fruit trees.)

Finally, manage pest problems quickly since they can weaken a tree's overall health and prevent fruit production.