

Hone Your Home Orchard

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Enjoy the fruits of your labor

Fruit trees bear many gifts: spring blossoms for bees and other pollinators, summer shade for birds' nests and fruit for whomever gets there first—you, the birds, or raccoons. Some diseases and insects also enjoy fruit trees. Fortunately, there are strategies for growing healthy fruit trees and enjoying a bountiful harvest here in Western Washington.

CHOOSE THE RIGHT VARIETY

Our state is renowned for growing apples. Lesser well-known fruits, but equally important, are Washington's pears, peaches, cherries, nectarines, and apricots. Few varieties flourish on both sides of the Cascade Mountain range. Beware of claims that a variety of tree, or any plant for that matter, will grow well everywhere in our state, from Pasco to Marblemount. That's usually only true for the plants you don't want, often known as weeds.

Some varieties of trees are resistant, or even immune, to common diseases and pests. Unless you enjoy fighting infestations and losing your fruit crop, look for recommendations from the Western Washington Fruit Research Foundation (WWFRF). The WWFRF website features lists of fruit trees best suited to the Pacific Northwest. Most nectarines and apricots need more heat than we usually get, though that may be changing. Don't expect a date palm tree to do well in western Washington—yet.

Many of us have wonderful childhood memories of climbing and hiding in huge apple trees, but modern trees are more compact. Trees grafted on dwarf rootstocks take up far less space within the home landscape. They also tend to mature and set fruit sooner than full-sized trees. Dwarf trees can be easier to harvest, and pests are easier to deal with if you can reach them without a 40-foot ladder.

WHAT TO PLANT

Do your research now but wait until late winter to buy and plant your new fruit tree. Many nurseries carry bare-root stock during February. Steve Renquist, horticultural extension agent at Oregon State University says, "Bare root trees cost less and have their roots exposed so you can see how healthy they are." He adds that planting the tree immediately provides the valuable element of time, so they will be well rooted before the heat of summer.

Fruit trees should be pruned regularly to encourage strong branches and healthy fruit. "Most trees are forgiving and will respond well to any basic pruning system that maximizes light exposure and takes into account the natural growth habits of the tree," according to the *Fruit Handbook for Western Washington*. This WSU Extension publication is available online.



Apple trees in full bloom in an orchard. *Photo by Catalin Petolea / Newspapertoolbox.com*

POLLINATION AND PESTS

Bees and other pollinators carry pollen from one flower to the stigma of another that begins the formation of fruit. Most trees require the presence of another compatible variety of tree for access to new pollen.

Self-fertile varieties set fruit with pollen from their own flowers and can be useful in a small yard with only space for one tree. But the *Fruit Handbook for Western Washington* states, “Cross pollination is required or recommended for most apples and pears and many sweet cherries and plums. Most peaches, nectarines, apricots, and cherries are self-fertile, but a few require cross-pollination.”

Many pests, including the infamous codling moth, are delighted to find fruit in your yard. Integrated pest management (IPM) uses many tools to protect fruit, from covering fruit and encouraging beneficial insects to chemical sprays. **NEVER SPRAY FRUIT TREES IN BLOOM!** Those flowers are attracting pollinators that will help your tree to fruit. Spraying will kill them. Be sure you correctly identify the disease or pest and its lifecycle and follow application instructions precisely. If you harm or kill a pest’s natural predators, you inherit its job.

You can learn about IPM strategies and get help identifying pests, diseases or other problems at the WSU Extension Skagit Master Gardener Diagnostic Clinics (see Infobox.)

Choose the right trees, provide the best growing conditions, and you will enjoy the fruits of your labors for many years.



Apple blossoms attract a variety of pollinators; never spray trees in bloom. Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.



Apple orchards fill the air with a sweet scent and produce one of Washington state's most popular export crops. Photo by Nancy Crowell / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.

RESOURCES:

- “Fruit Tree Pest Management.” Oregon State University.
<https://extension.oregonstate.edu/gardening/berries-fruit/fruit-tree-pest-management>
- “Home Orchard Concepts from Start to Finish.” Oregon State University.
<https://extension.oregonstate.edu/collection/home-orchard-concepts-start-finish>
- “Western Washington Fruit Tree Research Foundation.”
<https://nwfruit.org/fruit-garden/>
- “Organic Pest and Disease Management in Home Fruit Trees and Berry Bushes.” Washington State University.
<http://pubs.cahnrs.wsu.edu/publications/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/publications/em066e.pdf>
- “Fruit Handbook for Western Washington.” Washington State University.
<https://pubs.extension.wsu.edu/fruit-handbook-for-western-washingtonpdf>