

Growing FRUIT in the Home Garden

Growing bucket loads of fresh healthy fruit in your own back yard is not as tricky as you might think, provided you follow a few basics...

* Choose trees to suit your climate

Also, know your microclimate. For example, fruit trees need extra shelter on a windy coastal site. Pockets of high summer humidity may be best suited to tropical fruit varieties.

* Drainage is essential

Fruit trees will sulk or die if their roots are waterlogged. To improve drainage mound up the ground before you plant, plant in raised beds, or a slight north-facing slope where excess water can drain away.

* A sunny location.

The more sunlight reaches a tree, the better the fruiting will be.

* Prepare the soil

Apply plenty of compost to improve drainage and moisture retention. In a soil that's rich in organic matter, roots make the most efficient use of water and nutrients.

* Shelter

Shelter is necessary to protect trees from the drying, cooling and destructive effects of strong winds. A 2m tall boundary hedge will give shelter without blocking sunlight and airflow.

* Pollination

Find out how pollination works for your chosen varieties. Some fruit varieties need pollinator trees for best fruiting. Others are self-pollinating. Plant the likes of lavender and rosemary to attract more bees.

* Watering and mulching

Newly planted trees need regular watering until their roots are well established. Deep summer watering, especially in dry climates, improves fruit quality and helps prevent fruit drop. Soaker hoses or trickle irrigation systems are the easiest way to ensure water penetrates deep into the soil. A 5-10cm layer of organic mulch helps keep moisture in. Lay mulch under the entire tree canopy, but not touching the trunk.

* Feeding

Feeding in spring supports fruiting, but choose a fertiliser suitable for the type of fruit trees. Too much nitrogen can promote excessive leaf growth at the expense of fruit. On acid soils, dolomite lime can help with nutrient uptake. Fruit trees grown in containers need extra feeding. Use controlled-release, coated fertilisers supplemented with liquid fertiliser, especially around flowering and fruiting. Do not use concentrated powdered fertilisers on container plants.

Pruning notes

Prune young fruit trees to 'train' their growth into an attractive shape with a strong framework for optimal fruiting.

An open vase shape allows air and sunlight to reach the branches, hence more fruit and better disease resistance. Four or five evenly spaced main branches (leaders) extending from a central trunk is ideal. Alternatively fruit trees can be trained flat, as an espalier, on a fence or wall, or over an archway.

For apples and pears: At planting time, young trees with no side branches can be cut off at the top to encourage side branches (leaders) to shoot. From these, lateral branches will grow, and upon these the fruiting 'spurs' will form. After spurs have formed, shorten unwanted laterals (such as those crowding the inside of the tree) to about 10cm long. Spurs remain viable for several years.

Established apple and pear trees are pruned in winter to let in light and replace old wood with younger more productive growth. In general, it's better to remove entire branches every few years, than trim every year. Healthy branches only need to be pruned if they are growing inwards or if the tree is out-growing its space.

For stonefruit: At planting time rub off any shoots arising from the main stem, leaving three to five well spaced leaders. Young single-leader trees can be cut off at the top to encourage branching. In the second winter remove any very weak growth and shorten the main leaders by about a half and remove lateral branches growing near their ends, keeping a few lower down near the trunk. In the third winter prune to prevent overcrowding, removing laterals growing from the top 20cm of each leader.

Because stonefruit trees are susceptible to silver leaf disease, pruning of established trees is often left until late summer, as the spores are carried in water. Most importantly, prune only in dry weather and apply pruning paint to the cuts.

If the overall shape is good, little pruning is required. Hard pruning can over stimulate growth at the expense of fruit. However, a little pruning each year stimulates new fruiting wood to grow and prevents fruit being produced further and further out on the branches. Plums and peaches fruit only on last seasons growth.

Apricots are borne on one or two year old laterals or spurs which remain viable for 3 - 4 years.



Apple 'Adore'



Peach 'Sweet Cap'