



Urban Harvest

Don't Sweat the Idea of Summer-fruit Gardening

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Hot weather will soon be on us. If you do food gardening, you may wonder whether the heat, humidity, water bills and mosquitoes don't make summer-food gardening a fool's enterprise?

The best way to do summer-food gardening is to select plants that minimize care and watering, while still providing production of something nutritious, tasty and plentiful during parts of the summer when you will be home to enjoy them.



Darlene Sweet muscadines make a delicious treat in August.

Your garden design should start with fruits, and to enjoy them this year you would have had to plant months or years earlier. If you have raised vegetable beds, next April you should plant Ambrosia hybrid cantaloupes. If you plant seeds in pots and put them down the center of a bed 10 inches apart in two rows, and keep the ripening melons off the earth a few inches, you can enjoy a lot of delicious fruit in June, July and August.

In June, the Celeste banana, and LSU purple figs are worth growing, as are many more fig varieties. The Anna, Golden Dorset and Carnivale apples also fruit in early summer. These trees are easy to care for and will produce fruit significantly four to six years after winter planting.

Blackberries continue their production from early May. Late-season varieties such as Kiowa and Tupi produce berries through June and into July. Unlike most summer fruit, these require some work since fruited canes must be cut out, and new canes tied to stakes for next year's fruits.

July continues the fig and melon harvest, and you eat any apples you have refrigerated. Disease-resistant bunch grapes then make their appearance with Blanc du Bois early in the month and Mortensen Hardy in early August. Like all small fruits, these bunch grapes need protection from birds with some form of netting, and they benefit from regular summer watering, so an irrigation system reduces work and increases production.

In late July, pears are harvested for eating during the next two months. You need two for pollination, and they need a lot of pruning in winter. Acres Homes, Southern Bartlett and Tenn are my favorites.

Pomegranates and sweet muscadines come in at this time. These start in late July and continue through August and into September. There are big differences between the varieties. Of the sweet muscadines, my favorite is a bronze-skinned variety called Darlene. The grapes are nearly plum size and sweeter than watermelon, and to my palate, have much better flavor than bunch grapes. To get them however, you need to have a pollinator such as the purple Ison.

Pomegranates are another story. No fruit is undergoing more rapid change nationally. In recent decades, the range of possible varieties to grow has expanded enormously. There now are varieties such as Desertnyi, Sin Pepe (Pink Satin) and Eversweet that have soft, edible seeds and an excellent balance of sweet and tart flavors. Whether they will be productive in our humidity and rainfall, and replace hard-seeded Eve and Cloud as our best varieties, is still unknown.

What is known is summer-food gardening is productive and delicious, and given the cloudy weather, surprisingly easy and enjoyable.

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