



Urban Harvest

Many Tropical Fruits are Hardy Enough for Houston Area

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Fruit trees are among the best home investments you can make since they are attractive, easy-care yard plants that produce outstanding fruit with relatively little effort.

We fruit enthusiasts especially like the winter months, because every winter, the various Master Gardening groups, Urban Harvest, and some nurseries feature sales where dozens of kinds of fruit trees that do well here are featured all in one place at one time.

In recent years the fruit tree sales have increasingly featured tropical and semi-tropical fruits.

Some of these, like citrus, are familiar and relatively winter-hardy even if many delicious types we grow are rarely found in stores. But others, particularly the Myrtle family fruits from Brazil and the Soapberry family fruits from Southeast Asia, are little known here, and are truly wonderful.

Since these don't go dormant and lose their leaves, they are shipped in pots, sheltered in greenhouses and watered daily, so are typically more expensive.

Nevertheless, given the price of the inferior long distance tropical fruit in the stores, at \$35-50 per plant, they can be a good investment.

The Harris County Bear Creek fruit tree sale has already passed, and the next one up is Urban Harvest's at 1900 Bering Drive next Saturday 9-2. It is the only one inside Beltway 8, but there will be several others outside the belt in weeks to come. As with all sales, the best selection goes to the early bird.

Tropical and semi-tropical plants have different cold tolerances. On Jan 2 and 3, Conroe's low temperatures were around 23 and Galveston's were about 38. Intercontinental Airport was about 27, Hobby about 32, as were sites in Meyerland and Montrose. A Hermann Park area weather station reported around 35.

In my own yard near the southwest loop, temperatures hit 28.4 near the ground in the open facing north winds, but stayed a toasty 35 near the southern corner of my house with tall trees on all sides. On windy, cold nights I have about a temperature difference of 7 and on still, cold nights I have a difference of about 5.

The lesson for us all is to put tender plants in our warmest places, and, unless we are growing in containers or tall greenhouses, only plant ones adapted to our own micro climate.

The tropical fruits that will be available at the sales range widely in their cold hardiness, in their productivity, in their eventual tree size and especially the quality of the fruit. No one can predict exactly what will happen weather-wise in the future, but you can learn what the temperatures were in your area over the past decade at www.urbanharvest.org/advice/basics/weather_data.html.

Broadly, most tropical fruits are safe within 12 miles of the Gulf and in the Hermann Park area. In most other parts of urban Houston south of I-10 and inside the loop (perhaps even to Hobby), tropicals will do well in protected areas. In other parts of the Metro region, increasing amounts of winter protection will be necessary as the location gets more rural and further from the Gulf.

Myrtle family fruits for sale next Saturday include the allspice tree, Cherry of the Rio Grande, Grumichama, Guava, and Jaboticaba.

Despite the strange names, some of these are outstanding fruits. Jaboticaba and Grumichama are up there with the world's tastiest berry/cherry type fruit, and Cherry of the Rio Grande is not far behind. Some varieties of Jaboticaba are hardy to the low 20s, the flowers are beautiful, and the plant makes a good hedge.

The fruits are ranked above citrus by some experts. Grumichama is as delicious, and is said to be cherry-flavored. It is damaged at 27 and barely survives 25. Both are small trees. Cherry of the Rio Grande is hardier down to 20-22. Guava is among the most nutritious of fruits, but is badly damaged at 29, and allspice when young can't handle a freeze at all.

Longans and lychees are two of the world's finest flavored fruits with opinions differing as to which is better. They both barely survive 25, but if they do, get to 30 feet of sheer beauty. Longans are more drought-tolerant and less flood-tolerant than lychees.

The sales will have some excellent other tropicals. Mangoes are hardy maybe to 26 and have proven productive here in favored locations. The Day variety of avocado is hardy to 24, and the Lula variety is hardy to 25 and both will be available.

There will also be star fruit or carambola. These are highly productive, delicious fruit completely different in flavor from the green-picked sour things in the markets. The small tree reaches 20 feet. and survives at least 25 degrees.

Lastly ,the Christmas cactus, like dragonfruit (night-blooming Cereus or pitaya), will be available. Its beautiful night-blooming flowers are followed by delicious fruit with minute seeds. This easily protected plant is hardy to 27 and was a favorite of the late Sol Meltzer.

Urban Harvest produces this column. Learn about gardening classes, community and school gardens, farmers' markets, organic landscaping and more at www.urbanharvest.org.