



Urban Harvest

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Planting the Fruit Tree

Excerpts from Bob Randall's book *Year Round Vegetables, Fruits, and Flowers for Metro Houston*

When a tree is transplanted, roots are damaged while the leaves keep giving off water, so in hot weather, it is very easy to lose a root-damaged tree. If the tree is planted when it is dormant, and evaporation is at a minimum, there is much less risk. Therefore, you should plant trees between the middle of December and the middle of February unless they are frost sensitive. For semi-tropical fruits such as figs, bananas, papayas and citrus, plant in the middle of March. You want them planted late enough to avoid freezes, but early enough to develop a good root system before either summer heat or winter cold. If non-tropical potted trees have good roots, you can plant any time, if you are careful not to damage the roots. Winter is still preferred for these though, since they can adapt before having to cope with high heat.

Bare root trees do not have soil around them, so you need to do the following:

- Do not let the roots of the tree dry out or be exposed to temperature below freezing. It is OK to let the trunk be exposed. Keep the tree cool.
- When you get the tree, plant it within a few hours or keep the roots in damp bark mulch, wet newspapers, soil, or something until you can plant it. Do not let the tree roots sit in water.

To plant:

- Plant your fruit tree in a location that receives at least six to eight hours of full sun. The exceptions are most citrus such as oranges, grapefruit, and lemons, which can have as little as 4-6 hours of sunlight and still be productive. Also choose a location that does not have sitting water after a rain, and if needed plant on a mounded area.
- If you choose to build a mound on which to plant the tree, you can mix some existing soil with a good compost mix above ground level. Never mix loose soil below ground level in a clay soil. Mix enough to form a mound that is at least 1-2" high and 4' in diameter.
- Some trees come in pots and some are bare-root without any soil. These are purchased at local fruit tree sales and planted either the same day or a day later. For trees that are in pots, dig the hole slightly deeper and wider than the pot. For bare-root trees, dig the hole big enough so that the roots can be spread out without being cramped.
- Before you plant, dig down below where the roots will be planted and chop up the soil with a shovel. Now prune off any broken roots or shorten very long ones, and set the tree in the hole.
- When taking the tree out of the container remove all of the loose soil from the root system and spread out the roots. If needed dig to accommodate a spreading root system.
- Create a mound of loosened soil inside the hole and place the tree on top of this mound with the roots spreading out over the mound. If it is a grafted tree, such as most of the apples, pears, stone fruit (peach, plum, nectarine, apricot, cherry) and some citrus, find the graft line. This is the place

at the bottom of the trunk where the plant that the root system was taken from was spliced to the plant the trunk was taken from. You should see a diagonal scar 2 inches to 1 foot above the base of the trunk. This graft line must never be at or below the soil, so be sure you plant high enough so that even if the soil settles below the tree, the graft line will be above the soil.

- Now carefully fill in chopped dirt below and around the roots and replace with the same soil that was removed from the hole. Do not mix or replace with a loose soil. Loose soil sitting below ground level in a clay soil will hold water and could result in drowning a tree. The tree should be planted to maintain ground level. Finish by tamping the soil down carefully with your feet. Then water with a hose.
- Mulch at least a four foot diameter around the tree at three inches deep. Use leaves, pine needles or a partially decomposed native mulch, which can be purchased at nurseries and feed stores. Leave a few inches around the trunk free.
- In the first year check soil moisture twice weekly during hot dry weather by sticking your finger into the soil under the mulch an inch or so. If dry, water.

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