



Urban Harvest

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Care of Fruit Trees

The Basics of Taking Care of a Young Fruit Tree

Having healthy productive fruit trees takes a little bit of knowledge and a little bit of care in the areas of selection, planting, pruning, fertilizing, watering, pest management, harvesting, and weather protection. When proper attention is devoted to all of these, you will enjoy the fruits of your labor.

Critical Things Required to Insure Health of Tree

- Keep roots of bare root trees in moist mulch until planted. If the roots get dry, the tree will likely die.
- Keep the graft point a couple inches above the ground when the tree is planted.
- Plant the tree where water will drain off quickly after a rain. If you need to plant in areas where water stands after a rain, then build a raised bed with a good garden soil mix. Make the raised bed high enough so all water will quickly drain off. Plant the tree in the raised bed.
- Check twice a week in the summer for proper water especially the first year. Trees like regular consistent watering.
- Plant trees proper distance from each other to allow for enough sun. The proper distance is the diameter of the tree at the adult size.
- When first pruning, always leave at least one bud, or there will be nothing to grow. Some plants like citrus do not need pruning.
- Protect bark around the tree from weed whackers
- Plant citrus, avocados, cherries in spring only after last possible freeze.

Selection

All the fruits sold at the Urban Harvest sale are varieties that will work well in the Houston metropolitan area. However because different parts of the metro area experience different temperatures in the winter, some varieties are better for specific areas of town. In the case of citrus, cold sensitive citrus works better the farther south you are, while downtown or Montrose provides warmer temperatures than the Woodlands and thus a better chance of citrus survival from freezing temperatures.

On the other hand, since the Woodlands and Conroe get more cold temperatures, you can grow trees that require a higher number of chill hours for fruit production, such as some of the stone fruit and pear varieties. Be sure to select varieties that will work where you are going to plant the trees. Semi-tropical fruits like citrus will do best in protected, warmer parts of the area, especially in dense urban areas and near the gulf and bay, but on the south side of buildings; or especially hardy varieties of citrus, will do well in other places. More rural areas and those farther north get the most

chill, and the places recommended for the semi-tropical fruits above get the least. So choose your plants carefully according to what part of the area they will grow in.

Planting

When, where, and the manner in which you plant the tree is critical. Therefore we have a separate handout on planting. Of vital importance is: bare root trees must be planted as soon as possible (the same day you purchase them). If you cannot plant the same day, heal the roots into the ground so they are covered and water the soil to keep the roots moist until you plant properly. Never let the roots dry out before planting. Citrus and avocados and Barbados cherries should be planted in late-March after the last possible frost.

Pruning

Most fruit trees need to be pruned with few exceptions such as citrus, feijoa, jujubes and figs. These can be pruned but it is not necessary. All others need pruning. There are many good books on pruning and Urban Harvest teaches excellent classes on pruning. The most important thing to know right now as you purchase new bare-root trees is that they need to be pruned when you plant them. Peaches, nectarines, plums and apricots all need to be snipped at 24" to 30" and remove all side branches. This needs to be done with bare root trees.

Trees in pots may have already been snipped last year. If they have, you do not need to snip them again. You may think that you are destroying your tree by snipping it, but you are actually insuring that the tree will produce stronger branches that can be pruned to a shape that is conducive to health and good production. You are now set until the winter dormant pruning. If you have purchased a potted plant that was pruned last year, you will need to now prune them in the shape of a bowl with the center open. Get information on how to do this from Urban Harvest classes, Agricultural Extension Services or the Internet.

Grapes and muscadines need to be planted along a trellis system of some sort with the vine planted at the base of one of the trellis posts. At the time of planting, trim off any dead wood and damaged or diseased roots. Trim the vine back to two healthy buds and tie the vine loosely to the trellis post. The vine will grow in the spring and you will be able to decide on side branching and the trellising method you want to use.

Blackberries need no initial pruning when planted other than to remove any damaged plant material. When canes grow to be 48" in height, they need to be pruned to encourage branching for fruit production. After berry production, the canes that produced the berries need to be cut out at the base. You will know which canes because they will begin to die after production.

- Pecans need to be pruned back to 1/3 or 1/2 of its size and remove side branches, once you have planted the tree. The cut needs to be made just above a bud scar. Early in the summer, there will be a number of shoots developing. Choose the straightest and most healthy upright shoot to become the central leader (main trunk) and remove all other upright shoots, but leave horizontal shoots. Now you are set until the winter dormant pruning.

Pears, apples and persimmons need to be snipped at 32" to 36" and remove all side branches once they are planted. This needs to be done with bare root trees. Trees in pots may have already been snipped last year. If they have, you do not need to snip them again. These trees are trained with a modified central leader. During the growing season when shoots develop near the top of the trunk,

select the strongest shoot to be the central leader. Select four other branches that are growing in four different directions and cut them back to 1" to 2". Remove the rest of the branches. As new branches sprout and grow, use some method to spread them to grow at an angle between 45 and 65 degrees. This will get you to the dormant winter pruning time.

Citrus should only be pruned to remove dead or diseased plant material. Or branches too close to the ground or in the way.

Fertilizing and Mulching

Proper fertilization and mulching is essential for good plant growth as well as disease management. Cottonseed meal, which can be purchased at most feed stores, is an organic fertilizer that works very well. Use Dr. Bob Randall's book for detailed instructions on fertilizing, but refrain from fertilizing when you plant your new tree. Dr. Randall's fertilization schedule begins in February and remember that young plants need less fertilizer than more mature plants, and fully grown trees need little or no fertilizer as long as they are well mulched. Keep the fertilizer removed from right around the trunk.

Examples of fertilization with cottonseed meal in February are: apples (1 ½ cups), blackberries (¾ cup), citrus (9 cups), fig (1 qt), bunch grapes (1 qt), muscadines (2 cups), peach, nectarine, plum, apricot, feijoa (6 cups), pears and persimmons (2 qt), pecans (3 qt). All fruit trees benefit from mulching with hay, leaves, green manure (clover, alfalfa, crotalaria, etc.) or especially composted shredded wood (Native Mulch). Mulch at least to the drip line, but keep the mulch a few inches away from the trunk. Several inches of quality mulch will do much to reduce the need for fertilizer and improve tree health greatly.

Watering: Fruit trees need consistent watering in the first few years. Watering can come from rain or a hose. During the first year, provide the tree with about 7 gallons of water per week, preferably once a week and water slowly. This will be a little more than 3 minutes with a ½" hose and 1 ½ minutes with a 5/8" hose. Berries require about twice this amount. Remember to account for rainfall when determining how much to water with a hose.

Pest/Disease Management:

Some fruits such as persimmons, pomegranates, feijoas, most citrus, most figs, grapes, muscadines and brambles have little or no pest or disease problems. Some fruit such as peaches, nectarines and plums need a great deal of care to harvest healthy fruit. Here are some suggestions, but you need only follow the suggestions, if there is a problem.

In December and February, spray all fruit trees with soy oil spray to kill miscellaneous eggs. When stone fruit (peaches, nectarines, plums, apricots) show a moon-like scar, pick off and dispose of immediately. This will help with the plum curculio. A new organic product, Surround, can be sprayed on stone fruit early in spring to prevent plum curculio. It can be purchased at Garden's Alive, Peaceful Valley Farm Supply and Edible Landscaping. It will leave a coating on the fruit that needs to be washed off before eating.

In March when 20% of pear blossoms are open, spray pear trees for fire blight with 1 Tbs. Bordeaux per quart of water. Repeat when 65% open, and again when all blossoms are open.

- In April, 6 weeks after citrus blossoms, treat for scale crawlers with insecticidal soap (1 tsp./gallon of water).

Some citrus are now experiencing Asian leaf miner, which affects new young leaves, but does not kill the tree. If you see signs of leaf miner, you can pick the leaves and bag them in order to try and stop the spread, or just as in ornamental plants with leaf miner, you can leave them alone. Alternatively, when new citrus leaves form, spray as directed with Neem Oil, which is organic.

Harvesting

This is the best part. Harvest fruit when ripe. How do you know when they are ripe? You can talk with other growers to find out when certain varieties are ripe; and you can pick and taste. Here are some helpful hints.

- Begin picking citrus when they first show color. They will not be at their sweetest, but still good. Satsumas are ripe when not fully orange, so start tasting early.
- Blackberries are harvested when they easily pull off the stem and taste sweet.
- Taste apples and pears when they look the right size for the variety that you are growing. Just keep tasting until you think they are ready.
- Stone fruit, figs, grapes and muscadines are ready when they begin to soften.
- Feijoas are ready when they fall off the tree or when they easily pull off.
- Pomegranates are ready when they are sweet. Keep tasting when they are a good size.
- Some varieties of persimmons, such as Saijo, are ripe when they begin to soften; others, such as Fuyu and Suruga, need to be picked while hard and ripened inside.
- Pecans are ripe when their shell opens fully.

Weather Protection:

Some fruit such as citrus need to be protected against temperatures below 22°F. Mexican limes, Sulcata Lemon and Australian Finger Lime and others are much less hardy than this and need to be planted in pots and taken inside during freezes.

Plant citrus after the last freeze, about mid-March, where they have protection by a south-facing wall. Before a deep freeze, put a large container of water next to tree trunk and wrap something around the tree or trunk and container. This will protect the tree from dying from a hard freeze. Another option is to pile leaves in abundance around the base and as high up on the citrus as possible. All fruit need proper watering through long periods of no rain to keep them healthy.

For more detailed information on planting your new fruit tree, be sure to read **Planting the Fruit Tree**

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