

Fruit for Small Gardens

These days, it's a rare kid that chooses the fruit bowl over the pantry. Nostalgic tales from the 'olden days' of apples nicked from a neighbour's tree, for them, seem hard to fathom. But today as always, stolen or not, the mouth-watering crunch of a freshly picked apple just can't be compared to the one off a shelf.

Most fruit is sweetest and crispest straight from the tree. Also, the shorter the delay between picking and eating, the more nutrient packed it will be. On top of that is the satisfaction of growing food that's free from harmful chemicals.

The days of the orchard sized back yard may be gone, but it's surprising how much fruit you can fit into a small city plot. Modern breeding, compact varieties, and dwarfing rootstocks have a lot to do with it. So too do the ancient arts of espaliering and container culture.

Winter is an ideal time to plant. When deciding what to plant, look at what grows well in your climate, the most productive varieties and what you most want to eat. But as well as providing fruit, consider what else these versatile plants can do for your garden.

When space allows an apple pear or plum tree not only provides delicious fruit but also beautiful spring blossom and a shady place to sit. Dwarfing rootstocks mean apple trees need not ever reach more than a few metres tall. Fruiting vines are the ultimate multi-functional plant, and there is a lot more to citrus than bucket loads of vitamin C.

Turn your whole backyard into a year-round fruit bowl and the kids won't be the only ones converted to new taste sensations. Just watch those neighbours!

Fruit trees as walls

Growing fruit in a two dimensional space is a catching trend in today's small gardens. Even a tiny courtyard will accommodate an espalier (a French word pronounced es-pal-yay), but the practice harks back to the huge kitchen gardens of sixteenth century Europe. It can be applied to almost any fruit tree; apples, figs, olives, tamarillos, cherries, citrus, peaches, pears and plums.

An espaliered fruit tree gets more sunshine per volume of leaf area than the natural tree shape, and generally more shelter and warmth, hence maximum fruiting. As well as space saving and high yielding, an espalier is extremely decorative.

The main pruning is done when the plant is dormant, in winter or early spring, but the tying down of branches is easiest in early summer when branches are most supple. Regular trimming keeps vigorous summer growth in check.

Whether you grow them as trees or espaliers pip and stone fruit need fertile, well-drained soil and plenty of sun with shelter from strong winds. For an attractive shape and plenty of fruit, pruning in the first few years is important to develop a sound branch structure, strong enough for the heavy crops. At planting time a young single leader apple tree should be pruned to about two thirds its height. This encourages side

branches, or leaders, to shoot. The same method applies whether you are establishing a regular tree shape or training it flat against a wall.

Water deeply in summer and apply fertiliser at blossom time. Apply organic mulch to keep the roots cool and moist. Winter spraying with copper and again at bud swell (early spring) cleans up over-wintering fungal spores. Hanging codling moth traps in apple trees in early spring significantly reduces this common pest.

Fruiting vines

A **grapevine** grown over a pergola makes lovely summer shade. Although, in late summer the ripe fruit will attract wasps, so they are not always the best choice for the pergola next to the living room. These deep rooted vines need free draining soil, full sun and robust support. Mature vines must be pruned hard every winter, as wood that is over a year old will not bear fruit. Organic mulch should not be used around grapevines. Use stones or pebbles to warm the soil and block the weeds.

Passion fruit vines are vigorous growers, but easily kept to small garden proportions. Support is necessary and vines should be pruned each year in early spring, as soon as the risk of frost has passed. Easy-to-grow 'Black Beauty' is the favourite purple skinned passion fruit, providing loads of sweet fruit in summer and autumn. Red Banana passion fruit produces spectacular scarlet flowers which hang like lanterns from a pergola, followed by large sweet yellow fruit. Passion fruit vines need feeding and regular watering for best fruiting. Poor fruit set may be due to low night temperatures or a shortage of insect pollinators.

Relatively new on the scene, **Cocktail Kiwi** look just like baby kiwifruit when cut, but these smooth skinned, bite sized treats are eaten whole, skin and all. They are both sweet and rich in antioxidants. The vine blooms in spring with fruit following in late summer. Separate male and female vines are needed. A sturdy support structure is important, with well-drained fertile soil in a sunny sheltered position. Rigorous winter pruning is important to control size and maintain productivity, and a late summer trim lets the sun in to assist ripening

Big pots

Growing fruit in large containers is a great way to restrict a trees size and escape poor soil, but diligent feeding and watering is essential for good crops.

Citrus trees look wonderful in large pots or tubs and have been grown this way for centuries. It's a good option if your soil is poorly drained. Best for pots are the most compact citrus trees, such as Clementine mandarins, Meyer lemons and limes. The main limitation with container grown citrus is their need for constant moisture. A minimal weekly soaking is needed to prevent the water stress that leads to early fruit drop. Feed in spring with controlled release fertiliser (never use powdered fertiliser in pots) and liquid feed regularly till autumn.

Compact, smaller leafed citrus varieties respond well to training as clipped standards, making an attractive centre piece or a neat formal row. Start by choosing trees with good shape and a straight single trunk. Remove side growth up to the desired height then trim the top to encourage a tick bushy head. Prune mainly in spring immediately after fruiting.

Given a warm climate and a free draining soil, citrus are easy care and relatively trouble free. Most problems occur when the roots are too wet or too dry. If nutrients are in short supply, leaves may turn yellow and fruiting will be limited. Curled young leaves are the work of aphids, small crowds of soft bodied bugs which suck on young leaves. Squash them manually or spray with soapy water. Marigolds or Lavender planted near citrus may help as a repellent. Speckled, silvery leaves are caused by microscopic spider mites which feed on the undersides of leaves in hot dry weather. In severe cases the leaves become brown and brittle, dropping to the ground. Dousing the undersides of the leaves is a good deterrent.

Other fruit trees which do well in large containers include **olives, figs**, and apples on dwarf root stocks.

Fruiting hedges

In a mild climate, **feijoas** are one of the easiest fruit trees to grow. Fruiting in winter, the feijoa also boasts a thick mass of wind tolerant grey-green foliage which makes for a very attractive shelter tree or hedge. For fruit, plant grafted trees, ideally two different varieties. Better fruit results from twice yearly feeding.

The **Chilean guava** has fragrant flowers, attractive evergreen foliage and tasty red fruit in autumn. It fruits generously, even in partial shade, is cold hardy, wind tolerant and easily clipped to form a low or medium hedge. Prune young plants to encourage early branching. Flowers and fruit are produced in the 2nd or 3rd year. Fruit can be eaten fresh, added to juices or fruit salads or made into jam.

Blueberries are easy to grow and naturally resistant to many pests and diseases, but bird netting is recommended. Though deciduous it loses its leaves for a short period in mild climates and makes a pretty hedge. Fruit appears in autumn. To fruit well they need full sun and constantly moist, well drained, lime-free soil with lots of compost added. Well drained peat soils are their favourite. Best for a mild climate, the species *Vaccinium ashei* has a low chill requirement.

Fruiting fillers

Not all fruiting plants are woody trees and vines. **Strawberries**, planted in winter or spring, take up little space and fruit very quickly after planting. Lots of feeding and keeping up with watering are the main requirements. Make a strawberry border or grow them in pots, and use nets to keep birds away from your fruit. **Rhubarb** can be picked year round, and even if it's not your favourite dessert, the big bold leaves look great in garden.

Cape gooseberry fits easily into a mixed flower border where it will provide welcome winter colour. It is a soft stemmed shrub about a metre tall with pretty yellow flowers and autumn/winter fruit. The round orange fruit are protected by a papery "cape" and eaten fresh or cooked.

Pepino is a large egg-shape fruit with attractive yellow with purple stripes and a rock melon taste. It grows on a small bush that fruits heavily from December until the first frost. Try it in a container or plant in free draining garden soil, in a warm sunny spot with plenty of moisture. Plant pepinos as you would pumpkins and egg plants, as soon as the frost has passed in spring. Support is needed to keep the heavy fruit off the ground.

Suggested Products: Premium Mulch, Living Earth Compost, Living Earth Garden Mix, Quality Screened Topsoil, Stones and Pebbles, Fertiliser – available from Central Landscape Supplies in bag and bulk, pick up or delivery – free loan trailers available.