

Dual-purpose fruit trees

Winter is the time when garden centers and hardware stores have the widest selection of fruit trees. It's a great time to plant so long as the soil isn't too muddy.

There are lots of factors that go into selecting a fruit tree for your yard. Given the remarkable yield of most species, the first question is what kind of fruit you would like to have a lot of. Stone fruits, for example, can easily produce a couple of hundred fruit each summer. But the landscape value of a fruit tree can be another consideration.

We live in a region where it's easy to grow many kinds of fruit trees. If you are limited for space and don't want to make a dedicated area just for fruit trees, consider integrating them into your existing landscape. Some types are especially ornamental, with showy flowers, attractive fruit, interesting growth habit, bold leaves, nice fall color, and more.

Showy flowers

Peach blossoms are always pretty in spring, but certain varieties have exceptionally showy flowers as well as very good fruit.

- Red Baron peach has double red flowers for nearly two weeks in March, making a spectacular garden display. The fruit is very sweet,



rich flavored, and juicy, harvested in July. The only downside of this variety is that it softens very quickly. The best use is to eat it right there, fresh-picked, while you stand under the tree.

- Saturn peach is very similar to Red Baron, but the flowers are dark pink. It is more sweet than tangy.

These are both great garden plants for their showy flowers, and both yield prodigiously.

If you want firmer peach varieties for pies and freezing as well as fresh eating, the best for our area are Loring (ripens in

July), or O'Henry and Rio Oso Gem (both ripen in August). Elberta peaches are very popular as well.

Peaches do require pruning to manage the size of the tree and the fruit load.

Interesting growth habits

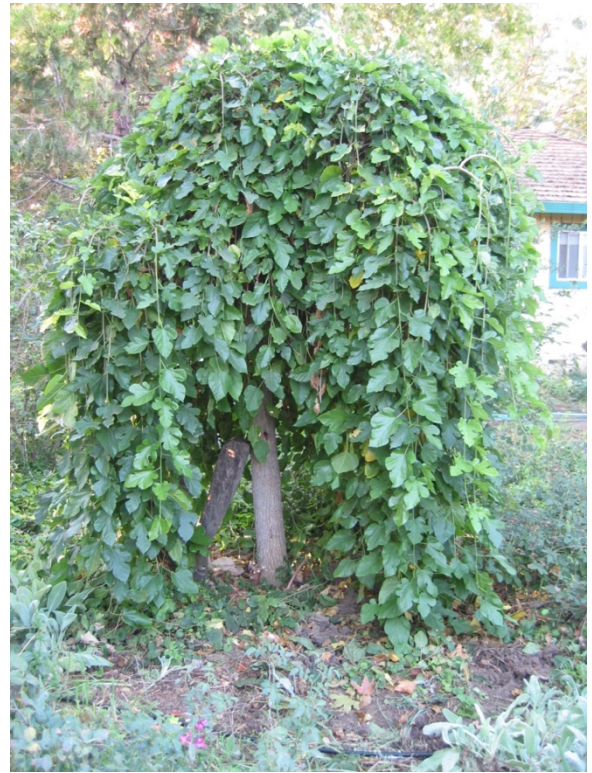
The Weeping Santa Rosa plum is a natural variant of Santa Rosa that occurred many years ago and was saved and propagated. It has, obviously, a weeping growth habit and can be pruned to make a very interesting garden accent. Plums bloom very early here, and this tree cloaked with white blossoms is a very showy harbinger of spring. It sets very heavy crops of the familiar Santa Rosa plum: tangy peel, sweet flesh.

Plums are among the easiest fruit trees to grow. We mainly prune them for size control and to reduce the fruit load.

Japanese and European plums do very well in our area. Of those with a regular upright growth habit, the best varieties are Santa Rosa (June), Nubiana and Satuma (July), or try some of the pluots (plum/apricot hybrids) such as Flavor Supreme (June) or Dapple Dandy (August). If you just want one plum to pick over many weeks, consider Burgundy or Emerald Beaut, each of which hold for 4 – 6 weeks on the tree.

Another weeping tree that makes an interesting landscape feature is the weeping mulberry. This very prostrate variety of white mulberry (*Morus alba* 'Teas') is grafted high onto an "interstock"; the branches cascade down to make a mound of foliage. We pruned ours into a playhouse for the kids when they were young. The fruit is sweet, juicy, prolific. It's also very messy, so plant it where that won't matter. Birds love them!

If you want mulberries primarily for the fruit,



Persian and Pakistan varieties are better choices for flavor, but they're much larger trees.

Mulberry trees are very easy to grow. They can take full sun, tolerate some drought, and the weeping form requires very little pruning.

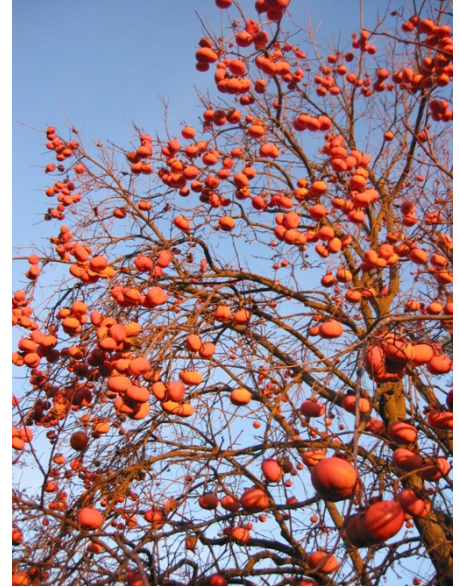
All-season beauty

Persimmon trees are lovely landscape trees as well as reliable fruit producers in our area.

Persimmons are pretty every season, with vivid chartreuse new growth in spring, very showy fall color, and the bright orange fruit is a nice feature even if you don't have a use for 200 – 300 of them. Fear not: cedar waxwings and other birds will enjoy them in early winter if you don't pick them.



A persimmon tree can easily get to 25 to 30 feet tall but are often pruned to reduce their size. They provide an open shade, so they are fine in a flower garden or perennial border. I've even seen them growing well in lawns. Just be aware that the fruit drops steadily through the season, which can be a minor nuisance. Fuyu variety is most popular because it can



be picked and eaten while it is still firm. Hachiya is the variety that must be squishy-soft before you can use it; the unripe fruit is highly astringent.

Fall color, showy fruit

Pomegranates are more like big shrubs than trees, as they rarely have a single trunk. There is probably no fruit type more heat and drought tolerant than a pomegranate. The flowers are very showy (there are even types grown just for the flowers). The fall color is bright yellow. Pomegranate fruits begin to turn color in early fall and get very vivid red by about October. If you don't pick them, winter songbirds will happily eat the arils from the fruit after it splits. We do recommend removing the remaining fruit mid-winter to remove harboring sites for leaf-footed bugs. Other than that they're basically pest-free.



No pruning is needed, but they can be clipped as large shrubs, trained up to look more like a tree, or even pruned as a hedge.

There are dozens of varieties of pomegranate trees, and all perform well here. They vary mostly in the intensity of flavor and how hard the seeds are. Commonly available are Wonderful (the main variety), Desertnyi (soft edible seeds), Eversweet (milder flavor), and Parfianka (very large fruit, low acid).

Bold tropical leaves

Figs have long been grown in the Sacramento Valley as they are well adapted to our summer heat. The attractive features are the bold tropical-looking foliage and the smooth white bark. They produce fruit over a very long time. We get a light spring crop and then the main production from late summer into fall.

Older types can become very large trees and shower you with excess fruit. Home gardeners find that dwarf or slower-growing varieties are more suitable for small yards. Any fig tree can be pruned for size control, but the dwarf ones are just easier to manage.

Look for Violette de Bordeaux, Blackjack, or some of the new introductions such as Little Miss Figgy and Fignomenal. Established fig trees can tolerate considerable drought.



How and where to grow fruit trees.

Fruit trees that you buy in winter are bareroot: field grown trees that are dug and sold without any soil. It's important to plant them right away so those roots don't dry out!

How to plant them.

Dig a hole that is wide enough to fit the roots without bending them. You don't need to dig any deeper than the root system. So that's usually a hole about 3 feet across by 18 inches deep. Point the bud union to the southwest.

Backfill just with the soil you dug out; we don't recommend adding any compost to the hole. Water thoroughly, stake if needed.

Stone fruits: paint up to the first branches with an interior white latex paint to prevent sunburn, or install a trunk guard.

Water thoroughly once a week; more often if you have fast-draining soil.

Cut them back?

We don't recommend pruning back fruit trees at the time you buy them. Leave the whole top and let it grow, and then you can decide on your training technique next winter. I prefer a modified central leader training technique, while others prefer a "vase" or open-training technique.

Where?

Full sun all day is best for fruit trees. At least a half-day of sun is really the minimum, or the sugar content of the fruit won't be high. Plums have moderate shade tolerance.

The best place in the yard is a spot where you can get in from all sides to prune the trees and pick the fruit. Be sure to plant the trees where the fruit litter won't be an issue.

Watering?

Deep watering once a week is best for fruit trees in their early years. Fruit trees can be compatible with the rest of your landscape irrigation. Most are not great in lawns.

It's planting time!

Fruit trees can be planted where you'll enjoy their ornamental value as well as the high-quality fruit, and with careful selection you can harvest different types over many months.



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