



Redwood Barn Nursery

1607 Fifth Street Davis, California

Top Twelve Fruit for Flavor

It's fruit tree season in nurseries, garden centers, and hardware stores. That means staff get some questions over and over. Two that tend to stump us are:

What's the best one?

Which one tastes the best?

The first is a very open-ended question, since there are lots of variables that would make a particular variety 'better' or 'best'.

The second is very much a matter of individual preference. One might say, a matter of taste.

How do you decide which fruit to buy?

The fruit industry has done a great deal of research to determine consumer preferences in fruit. Most people want a balance of sweetness and acidity. Some people only want very sweet fruit. At an official fruit tasting sponsored by Dave Wilson Nursery, I sat next to a nursery owner who down-rated all of the yellow peaches and only gave high marks to the very sweet white ones. Citrus experts tend to rank citrus that have rich, complex flavors more highly; the general public, on the other hand, has a preference for sweeter, milder-flavored citrus.

Meanwhile, in the grocery store, appearance is paramount. I've been appalled by the lack of flavor of many store-bought fruit that were picture-perfect. Seedlessness is crucial for selling citrus. In one consumer preference trial, they found the shape of the fruit was the most important variable for children in selecting fruit! And kids have different taste preferences than the adults who are buying fruit for them, preferring sweeter and less intense fruit flavors.

Choosing what to grow.

Over the last three years I've replanted a number of fruit varieties on my property. After three decades, many of the original trees are reaching the end of their lifespans. So I'm replacing some, and planting a new area with more trees. Chatting about this, a customer helped reframe the "what's the best" question more effectively.

"So, which ones are you planting? Which fruit trees would you not be without?"

Ah, that's much easier.

My goal is to pick high quality fruit every month of the year. I prefer low-input types, and we train and prune them low for ease of picking. We plant many types just to see how they do and what the fruit is like. But there are certainly some varieties I would not be without.

Every month of the year?

Here in the Valley you can harvest something every month. We get enough winter chilling for deciduous types, but it's mild enough for most citrus.

The basic pattern of harvest is:

November – March: citrus

April – June: berries

July – August: stone fruits



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September – November: pomes (apples, pears, quince), pomegranates and persimmons, and nuts.

In each category there are varieties that extend the season earlier and later. For example, Valencia oranges hold on the tree into the summer. Mulberries ripen into July and August. There are peach, nectarine, and plum varieties that fruit in May or June, or September.

Call this my top-twelve list for flavor.

- January: Washington navel orange. This old stand-by is so easy to grow, peel, and eat, that it gets taken for granted. I've had these fresh off the tree every winter for so many years that I can't imagine being without them.
- February: Clementine mandarin. This staple of the current marketing programs for mandarins has long been a popular home garden variety. It is on the sweeter, less tart end of the mandarin taste spectrum. They start to ripen just as the Owari Satsumas run out, and can be picked into March.
- March: Gold Nugget mandarin. Although this hybrid was made sometime in the 1950s, it wasn't really until the 1990s that its market potential was recognized. From the official description from UC Riverside, which houses the Citrus Variety Collection: "[t]he taste is extremely sweet when mature with a very rich flavor, considered by professional taste panels to be one of the very best flavored citrus in the world."
Growers like it because they store well after harvest, and the fruit is bright orange, seedless, and easy to peel. Late-ripening, you'll like it because it also holds very well on the tree with good quality well into the summer.
- April: Sequoia strawberry. Berry season begins with strawberries, which can ripen as little as 4 to 6 weeks after they begin to flower. Spring is traditional strawberry season.
For many years now the day-neutral varieties (many introduced by UC Davis) have extended the productive season through summer, but old-fashioned Sequoia is still my flavor favorite. Among the new types, Albion was the hands-down winner at an early-summer taste trial. But really, any fully ripe strawberry from your garden is phenomenal. And they're really easy to grow.
- May: Olallie berry is my sentimental favorite from my childhood. A California specialty, scarcely grown commercially, it begins to ripen in late May. It is described as a "wild blackberry" flavor, which means a little more tang than later-ripening blackberries.
- June: Blenheim apricot. I have slowly come around to apricots. Burned too many times by bland fruit in the stores and mushy fruit from trees, it is a very special fruit when perfectly firm-ripe.
Blenheim has been with us over 100 years, so long that it is classified as an heirloom fruit. There are sweeter 'cots that ripen later, but few as aromatic and uniquely sweet-tart. The folks at Slow Food USA, who have Blenheim in their Ark of Taste, praise the "intensely aromatic aroma of honeysuckle."



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There are a couple of problems with Blenheim. It's hard to tell when it's ripe, as it is ripening internally before the skin colors. Modern apricot varieties in the grocery store color up before they ripen, allowing growers to pick and ship them at an earlier stage (you know, bland and unripe). You really need to keep sampling Blenheims; by the time they're full color, they may be overly soft. The trees are prone to brown rot, which requires careful pruning and some spraying. But once you find the fruit at just that perfect stage of ripeness, you'll never buy an apricot at the store again.

- July: Loring gets my vote for top-flavored, all-purpose freestone yellow peach in this peak peach month, and it is top-rated in taste trials. Old-timers may still prefer the variants of Elberta.
- August: Satsuma plum, in my opinion, is among the most flavorful of all backyard fruits. Rich, almost wine-like flavor, intense purple color. I wait all season for this harvest, then cook at least some of them down into a powerful puree. Satsuma plum requires cross-pollination with another Japanese plum such as Santa Rosa.

August is a big month for stone fruits, so it's hard to choose just one. Dapple Dandy pluot is sweeter and tangier than other types, and can be harvested for several weeks. It's moving up on my top-twelve list.

Dapple Dandy requires cross-pollination with another pluot, or with Santa Rosa plum.

O'Henry and Rio Oso Gem peaches have firm texture and powerful flavor. They're some of the best for pies as well as fresh eating. In the pome fruit category, Shinko is the most flavorful Asian pear.

- September: White Genoa fig. I never was much of a fig fan, despite having large and very productive trees on my property. They're all sweet, no tang, kind of boring. Then someone brought me some White Genoa. Greenish on the outside, strawberry-pink on the inside, juicy, sweet, and surprisingly complex flavors. One of the best and simplest summer desserts I've had is Satsuma plums and Genoa figs, quartered and arranged on a plate with a good cheese. Brown Turkey and Conadria are acceptable substitutes.
- October: Pomegranates. October is really salsa month for me, with so many tomatoes and peppers that they are the focus in the garden and kitchen. But pomegranates are wonderful if you can figure out how to process them. My son acquired one of those old-fashioned metal cold-press orange juicers, and we found it ideal for juicing halved pomegranates. Caution: juice goes everywhere! And it stains.
Flavor among pomegranates ranges from sweet to startlingly robust. The variety called Wonderful is the standard. I think many people would prefer Eversweet as it is less tannic.
- November: Western Schley pecan. Every fall I am grateful, as I harvest 50 to 100 pounds of nuts, to the original owner of my farm that she planted a pecan tree. It's unlikely that you have room for one; my tree is over fifty feet tall!



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- December: Owari Satsuma mandarin. Everybody's favorite citrus! Easy to peel, seedless, rich flavor, juicy. If I only had room for two citrus, Owari Satsuma and Washington navel orange would be the ones.

Find a new favorite for your family! Check out the Ark of Taste at the Slow Food USA web site here: <https://www.slowfoodusa.org/ark-of-taste>



http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_fruityeararound/citrusorangenavel.jpg



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http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_fruityeararound/CitrusorangeWashNavelpeeledsm.jpg



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Various sports (natural mutations) of this variety have been grown in California since 1870, and navel oranges are still California's highest-acreage citrus crop. Washington navel orange is one of the easiest citrus to grow, and easy to peel and eat.



http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_fruityeararound/plumsandfigs.jpg

Satsuma plums are among the best-tasting summer fruit of all. They ripen in August, just in time to pair them with sweet fresh-picked figs for an easy summer evening snack or dessert.



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Pluots are complex interspecific hybrids of plums and apricots, genetically about 3 parts plum to 1 part apricot. A number of varieties have been introduced by Floyd Zaiger's fruit-breeding company, Zaiger's Genetics. The varieties were created by hand-pollination, not gene-splicing. Dapple Dandy is one of the richest-flavored of the first generation of pluots.



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http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_fruityeararound/peachripeJulyLoring%3F.jpg

Loring peach is one of the best mid-season peach varieties. Showy blossoms, attractive fruit, firm flesh, rich flavor – a taste trial winner.



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Pomegranates are very easy to grow and quite drought tolerant, and the trees have showy blossoms and great fall color. The fruit is very ornamental. Only problem is they're kind of a hassle to eat, so try juicing them.



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http://redwoodbarn.com/images/DE_fruityeararound/pecans.jpg



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Pecans are beautiful trees, but too big for most yards. Deep-rooted and easy to grow, they are very drought-tolerant once established. If you're only planting one tree, plant self-fruitful Western Schley variety for reliable nut production.



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The mandarin varieties grown for the Cuties™ marketing program have surpassed Owari Satsuma in total acreage in California, but Owari is still the pinnacle of mandarin goodness for outstanding flavor. In our area it ripens just before the holidays. Pick them fast, as they don't hold on the tree well.