

REDUCING PESTICIDES

it's perfectly natural.



THE ORGANIC FRUIT GARDEN

Growing your own fruit trees organically can be a very rewarding aspect of gardening. Fruit-bearing trees and shrubs can also be incorporated into the ornamental garden.

Fruit Trees

As is true for all organic gardening, organically-rich soil is an important first step. Fruit trees need well-draining soil in a location that gets at least six hours of sun each day.

Choosing a Fruit Tree – The first step is deciding what type of fruit you want. The common fruit trees – apple, pear, cherry, apricot and peach – are all hardy in Toronto, although peach and apricot are borderline and their flower buds may be lost in cold winters.

Your choice will be affected by the available space and desired size of the tree. Most fruit trees come in three sizes: (1) dwarf (4 – 10 feet tall); (2) semi-dwarf (10 – 16 feet tall); and (4) standard (up to 25 – 30 feet tall). Dwarf and semi-dwarf trees tend to be more practical for the city garden and are easier to maintain. All yield standard-sized fruit. Also, apple, cherry and pear trees all need a second tree for cross-pollination.

Within these constraints, be sure to select varieties that are disease-resistant. Also, be sure to buy a good specimen at the garden centre – one that has a strong, straight, relatively tall trunk, a well-defined “leader” (central branch), and well-balanced branches extending evenly in all directions.

Tips for Fruit Tree Production – There are a number of things you can do to increase the health of your fruit trees and to increase their yield. These include:

- Water fruit trees regularly. They need the equivalent of 2 – 3” of water every 2 weeks, preferably in one long, gentle watering.
- Mulch around the tree with organic matter such as leaf mould, keeping the mulch away from around the trunk.
- Feed in early spring with a well-balanced organic fertilizer. Do not overfeed since this may result in weak growth that is more susceptible to pests and disease.
- Prune while the tree is dormant, initially to develop a strong framework of branches and then, in subsequent years, to keep the tree’s structure open.
- Thin the fruit shortly after it starts to form to encourage larger fruit this year and more fruit next year.
- Pest control – many of the organic pest control products (insecticidal soap, dormant and horticultural oils, and sulphur sprays) can be used effectively on fruit tree pests



This fact sheet has been prepared by the Toronto Master Gardeners



and diseases if needed. As well, the prompt removal of any unhealthy leaves or branches or damaged and fallen fruit will help slow (if not stop) the spread of pests and diseases. Pheromone lure traps are also available for many of the common fruit tree insect pests.

- Clean up all leaves in the fall and do not compost them to reduce the over-wintering of the spores that cause apple scab and other fruit tree diseases.

Fruit-bearing Shrubs

In general, fruit-bearing shrubs require less work than do fruit trees. Plums cross the border between trees and shrubs while currants, gooseberries and blueberries are fruit-bearing shrubs grown primarily for their fruit. There are a number of other fruit-bearing shrubs that are more commonly grown for their ornamental value. These include high-bush cranberry (*Viburnum trilobum*), elderberries (*Sambucus canadensis*), and chokecherries (*Prunus virginiana*). These fruits can all be used for wonderful jams and/or jellies, among other uses.

Most fruit-bearing shrubs require growing conditions similar to those of fruit trees. However, currants will grow in partial shade and blueberries require an acidic soil.

Soft Fruits

Strawberries are one of the easiest fruits for the organic gardener. They grow best in raised beds in soil that has been heavily enriched with organic matter and that has a thick organic mulch between the plants. When planting, be sure that the strawberry crowns (the point where the leaves grow out from) are level with the soil surface. Do not let all the runners grow or you will end up with fewer, smaller fruit. Instead, cut out all but 4 – 6 runners per plant the first season and in subsequent years only leave runners needed to fill empty spaces with plants 8 – 10” apart over the entire growing area. Strawberries overwinter better under a thick (3 – 4”) layer of organic mulch laid on in mid-late November and repositioned between the plants in very early spring.

Raspberries are a delicate, easily damaged fruit but can be one of the most satisfying for the organic gardener to grow. Raspberries are not a low-maintenance fruit, but neither are they excessively demanding. They benefit from soil with generous amounts of organic matter and from a deep (8 – 10”) organic mulch between (but not touching) the canes – a great destination for leaves each autumn. Although their roots are perennial, the canes are biennial. Each year there are two sets of canes – last year’s growth that are bearing fruit and this year’s new growth that will bear fruit next year. (Fall-bearing raspberries produce a small crop on the current year’s canes in late summer.) Pruning is crucial for raspberry patch maintenance. In early spring, any winter-damaged or weak canes should be removed and the remaining canes thinned to about 4” apart. The second major pruning needs to be done shortly after the fruit is finished on last year’s canes. These canes need to be pruned out to ground level.

For more detail on organic fruit gardening, refer to [The Harrowsmith Book of Fruit Trees](#), by Jennifer Bennett (Camden House Publishers, 1991) and [Rodale’s Successful Organic Gardening: Fruits and Berries](#), by Susan McClure (Rodale Press, 1996).