

Fruit Trees For The Urban Home Grower

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St. Petersburg, FL
October 7, 2019

The Bad News About Citrus

- These days citrus is one of the most difficult kinds of fruit to grow, due to so many pests and diseases.
- If you have an established citrus tree, it's worth keeping it going as long as it will give good fruit. Use both soil fertilizer and foliar spray fertilizer (e. g. liquid kelp).
- Lemons (and perhaps limes) seem to be more disease resistant and sometimes do fairly well. Still worth a try.
- If you want to try growing an orange tree, look for a Sugar Belle. Consider placing it, if possible, under light canopy.

The Good News About Tropical Fruit

Coastal Southwest Florida is one of the best places *in the world* to grow tropical fruit:

1. Very mild winters allow a large variety of species to be grown.
2. We have *some* cold weather, which keeps the worst of the tropical fruit insect pests from surviving here.
3. The sandy soil that can be a challenge for vegetable growers is *perfect* for many species of tropical fruit trees.

Grafted Trees



Advantages of Grafted Trees

For most species, it is well worth spending the \$30 or \$40 to obtain a grafted tree of a named variety:

1. As an exact genetic copy of the scion tree (branch), it has been selected to have desirable characteristics, such as high-quality fruit, small tree size, disease resistance, or adaptability to our climate.
2. Hormonally it is a mature tree, and will produce fruit as soon as the tree is physically large enough. With a seedling tree, you might have a ten-year wait for some species. And the fruit will generally turn out to be mediocre.
3. It's easier to prevent a grafted tree from growing upward--- it's actually a big branch that wants to spread, not a juvenile tree that wants to rush upward to compete for light.

Fruit Tree Horticulture In Six Words

***Prune aggressively,
mulch heavily,
fertilize conservatively.***

Prune Aggressively

1. Control tree size--- keep most trees at 12 feet height or less.
2. Strengthen the tree against wind, climbing animals.
3. Open up the interior to light and air.
4. Increase the root-to-foliage ratio to promote new growth and provide energy for fruiting.

Prune Aggressively To Limit Size



Mango



Mango

Prune Aggressively To Limit Size



Peach



Sapodilla

Prune Aggressively To Limit Size



Loquat Hedge

Prune Aggressively To Limit Size



Avocado



Longan

Prune Aggressively To Limit Size



Papaya

Tip Pruning to Promote Shrubby Branching



Tip Pruning to Promote Shrubby Branching



Mulch Heavily and Fertilize Conservatively

1. My main fertilizer is **MULCH**. It breaks down slowly, adding nutrients while building the **soil ecology** to improve plant health and disease resistance.
2. Mulch stabilizes soil temperature and moisture, prevents erosion, and interrupts the life cycles of some insect pests such as Sri Lankan weevils and Diaprepes.
3. It suppresses weeds, for a while, although once it has composted in place, it makes a wonderfully rich growing medium for weeds.
4. For most fruit trees, we minimize (sometimes even avoid) nitrogen-containing fertilizers except on immature trees. *Notable exception: bananas are heavy feeders, especially nitrogen and potassium.*
5. I favor organic fertilizers (and minerals such as azomite, for minor elements) that break down slowly over time. And **gypsum** for calcium without alkalinizing the soil.
6. An occasional **foliar application of liquid kelp or fish emulsion** seems to work wonders.

Free mulch from local tree pruners



Other Advice

1. Unless you are a very devoted grower, avoid species that present special challenges: temperamental fruiterers (lychees, annonas), poorly-adapted temperate-climate or dry-climate fruits (stone fruits, pomegranates, apples), pest and disease-prone species (citrus, guava, peaches), freeze-intolerant species (jakfruit, coconuts, soursop, ...). Grow the easy fruits!

2. Remove fruit from young grafted trees, so they can spend their energy growing, not making a few fruit.

3. Plant on mounds ----->

4. Free and perhaps prune the roots when you plant.

5. Invest in automatic irrigation if you possibly can.



Bananas

1. Feed heavily. Drought tolerant but they *love* water.
2. Go to the trouble of obtaining **dwarf** varieties--- Dwarf Nam Wah, Dwarf Jamaican Red, etc.--- from reliable providers (mislabeling of banana varieties is extremely common). Locally I recommend Sulcata Grove in Sarasota as a provider.
3. My preferred style is to allow only one stalk to grow at a time. Cut off the stalk after fruiting--- it cannot fruit again. Use a serrated carving knife to remove spent leaves, and a trenching shovel to chop off shoots until you want to let one grow.

Bananas



Take A Class At An Urban Organic Tropical Fruit Farm

My 3-hour introductory class, the Fruit Tree Paradise Workshop, is taught in spring and in fall – **free handouts** and info on the class are on my website:

sweetsonggroves.com

The next workshop is
Sunday, October 20, 2:00-
5:00.



Wildlife

1. For many fruits, you will eventually have raccoons, possums, squirrels, and/or birds, and perhaps even deer, taking fruit from your trees.
2. There are numerous online ideas and products for deterring them--- repellents, hanging old DVD's on strings, firecrackers, flashing lights, ultrasound, etc. You will need to rotate these or they will become ineffective. They will probably become ineffective anyway. Wild animals are hungry and not stupid.
3. The remaining options are:
 - species selection,
 - barriers, and
 - population control.

Species Selection

1. Avocado, sapodilla, canistel, white sapote, black sapote and bananas can be harvested unripe before they are attractive to wild animals. Citrus is rarely attacked by animals (especially once it has died from diseases).
2. If you are careful, you can harvest your mangos when they are mature enough to ripen well on the shelf, but not yet attractive to raiders.
3. Carambola (starfruit) and jujube might attract some wild animals, but the trees are so productive that you will usually have more than you need anyway.
4. Peaches and plums can be protected effectively by bagging, and can be harvested still hard.
5. Difficult to protect are berrylike fruits (jaboticaba, lychees, longans, loquats). Longans tend to be safer from birds, perhaps because of their color.
6. Pineapples are famously difficult to protect (raccoons), and macadamias are nearly impossible (squirrels).

Bagging

1. Fairly effective against insects, birds, squirrels, possums and raccoons.
2. Not as tedious to do as it sounds.
3. Organza bags are light and very easy to use. Also there are other brands that are more durable.



Raccoons and Possums

1. One option is a 10 or 12-foot solid wall around your entire property.
2. Raccoons and possums can be considerably deterred by poultry netting, charged by a solar-cell battery (Intellishock). It is reasonably portable, but quite expensive, especially since the battery packs are not very durable. It does not stop squirrels.
3. The other main alternative is humane trapping and euthanizing (NOT relocating).



Squirrels

1. Squirrels (universally known to fruit tree growers as “rats with bushy tails”) are extremely destructive, often spoiling much more fruit than they actually eat.
2. Unlike raccoons and possums, in my experience squirrels are rather difficult to trap. It might help to cover the trap with pine needles or branches so that it doesn't look like a trap.
3. Cats and dogs that have active hunting instincts can be very helpful with squirrels. Some breeds of dogs, such as rat terriers, have been bred specifically to make the lives of rodents miserable.
4. In my experience, after five or ten squirrels have encountered Mr. Pellet, the entire population will tend to avoid the property. Of course hungry scouts (adolescent males, no doubt) will regularly enter to test. I have been able to maintain reasonable control with only an occasional reminder example needed.

Birds

1. Birds can be very damaging to certain fruit, such as figs, jaboticabas, stone fruit, lychees, longans, loquats, and berries. BUT many birds are insect eaters and won't bother fruit at all, indeed they may even help control pest insects and fruit-eating birds.
2. Bagging is effective against birds for many fruits.
3. Fairly effective, but more difficult is covering trees with bird netting. Netting is very cumbersome to work with. Wherever it touches mulched ground, pieces of mulch will adhere to it and will eventually require tedious cleaning. Also, birds and occasionally snakes (good guys, on our side) can get entangled and usually can't be removed while alive without seriously injuring them, and perhaps yourself in the process. If you do use bird netting, please have a pellet gun on hand for euthanizing hopelessly entangled small wildlife.
4. Keeping your trees short and just being out and about in your grove areas frequently (for example, to move slow-drip watering hoses from tree to tree) act as deterrents for daytime pest animals. Squirrels and birds want to be safe, and they don't like to be close to the ground and near humans, especially those who occasionally fire a pellet in their direction.

Mangos



- Wonderful, productive fruit trees for west of I-75
- Beautiful evergreen tree, hardy but subject to fungal diseases (generally controllable with non-toxic sprays)
- Can mix varieties to stretch fruiting season from April to October or even beyond
- *Select disease-resistant, semi-dwarf or dwarf varieties*
- Best varieties, according to Alex Salazar: Pickering (dwarf), Maha Chanok, Glenn, Florigon, Duncan, and Neelam (late season)

Avocados



- West of I-75, or east if a cold-tolerant variety
- Vigorous evergreen tree, easy to grow but famously *flood intolerant*
- Can choose varieties to fruit most times of year except spring
- Take a few years to reach fruiting size
- Very aggressive pruning needed to control size



Sapodilla

- Tastes like pears with brown sugar, long fruiting season, extremely productive
- Very easy to grow
- Harvested still hard and allowed to ripen on shelf--- not attractive to wildlife
- Get a good variety -- Alano, Silas Wood, Tikal, or the dwarf variety Makok





Canistel

- Long season, rich, excellent-tasting fruit if you obtain a named variety (Trompo, Ross, Fairchild #2)
- Attractive evergreen tree, easy to grow
- Fruit is harvested still hard, not attractive to wildlife
- Damaged by hard freezes, not for east of I-75





Carambola (Starfruit)

- Fruits throughout the second half of the year, very productive
- Beautiful medium-sized tree, small pink flower, evergreen
- More **shade tolerant** than most fruit trees --- in fact some afternoon shade may be better than full sun
- Obtain a high-quality variety--- Kary is excellent





Loquat

- Fruits December to February, depending on variety
- Evergreen, highly ornamental, small white flower
- Very cold tolerant, but **not** flood tolerant
- Fruit should be thinned and may require bagging to protect from fruit flies
- Get a good variety --- Christmas, Bradenton





Longan

- Similar to lychee, but fruits every season
- Fruits in August, September
- Evergreen, very attractive tree, vigorous grower
- Good varieties: Biew Kiew, Big Jim, Kohala
- Thin the fruit for larger size, and to prevent branches from breaking under weight



