

Fruit Trees for the Florida Home Grower

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Sarasota Succulent Society
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Me

- Retired in 2012 from a career in academia. Now living in paradise. Luckiest guy on the planet.
- Hobby farmer (“Some people like to spend their money on ski trips--- I like to spend mine on farming.”).
- SweetSong Groves is my 2-acre home and tropical fruit farm/botanical park at Mink Road and Myrtle Street in north Sarasota County (near Jessica’s Organic Farm Stand). SweetSong has approximately 200 fruiting plants, plus native plants and some ornamentals.
- SweetSong Groves LLC is my hobby business that sells fresh fruit locally (through Nature’s Co-Op at the Sarasota Farmer’s Market, Kenwood Organics in St. Pete, to private customers, and who knows where someday...). Its website is sweetsonggroves.com (where these slides have already been posted on the Presentations page).

My Succulent Collection



Peruvian Apple Cactus (*Cereus repandus*)

My Bromeliad Collection



Annanus comosus

The Bad News About Citrus

- Although it's a wonderful fruit, and very well adapted to Florida conditions, these days citrus is one of the most difficult species to grow in Florida, 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.
- Don't bother trying to grow grapefruit.
- If you really want to try growing oranges, the best bet is probably the new Sugar Belle variety.

The Good News About Tropical Fruit

Except for citrus, 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. But we have *some* cold weather, which keeps the worst of the tropical fruit insect pests from surviving here.
3. The sandy soil that can make life difficult for vegetable growers and some ornamentals is *perfect* for many species of tropical fruit trees.
4. Technical support from various government and academic entities, and from non-profits organized by local growers.

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



Peach



Loquat

Prune Aggressively To Limit Size



Black Sapote



Mango



Sapodilla



Avocado



Canistel



Starfruit

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, suppresses weeds, and interrupts the life cycles of some insect pests such as Sri Lankan weevils and Diaprepes.
3. 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.*
4. 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.
5. 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, and have lots of space, 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 mediocre fruits.

3. Plant on mounds ----->

4. When planting trees that are in containers, free and perhaps prune the roots.

5. Invest in automatic irrigation if you possibly can.



Bananas

1. Feed them heavily, especially potassium which they deplete quickly from the soil.
2. Although banana plants are drought tolerant, they *love* moisture (but not standing water).
3. Go to the trouble of obtaining high-quality dwarf varieties--- Dwarf Nam Wah, Dwarf Jamaican Red, Dwarf Iholene, etc.--- from reliable providers (mislabeling of banana varieties is extremely common). Locally I recommend Sulcata Grove as a provider.
4. 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



Banana Circle





Dwarf Nam Wah
Bananas

Avocados



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

Mangos



- Wonderful, productive fruit trees for west of I-75
- Beautiful evergreen tree, hardy but subject to fruit-damaging fungal diseases (generally controllable with non-toxic sprays)
- Can mix varieties to stretch fruiting season from April to October or even beyond
- *I recommend selecting disease-resistant semi-dwarf varieties, such as Glenn, Maha Chanok, Duncan, Florigon, and especially the true dwarf, Pickering*



Sapodilla

- Tastes like pears with brown sugar, long fruiting season, extremely productive
- Very easy to grow
- Can be 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



Carambola (Starfruit)

- Fruits throughout the second half of the year, very productive
- Beautiful medium-sized tree, small pink flower, evergreen
- Fruit is not very attractive to wildlife (except ants!), perhaps because of its oxalic acid content
- More **shade tolerant** than most fruit trees --- in fact some afternoon shade may be better than full sun
- Obtain a high-quality variety such as Kary, Sri Kembangan, Fwang Tung, Pine Island Gold
- Do not juice carambola, or eat it in massive quantities. If you have impaired kidney function, or suffer from gallstones or kidney stones, then avoid it altogether.





Canistel

- 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





Loquat

- Fruits January to March, depending on the variety
- Evergreen, highly ornamental (the “HOA fruit tree”), 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 grafted named variety





Longan

- Similar to lychee, but not a temperamental fruiter
- Fruits in August, September
- Evergreen, very attractive tree, vigorous grower
- Good varieties: Biew Kiew, Big Jim
- Thin the fruit for larger size, and to prevent branches from breaking under weight



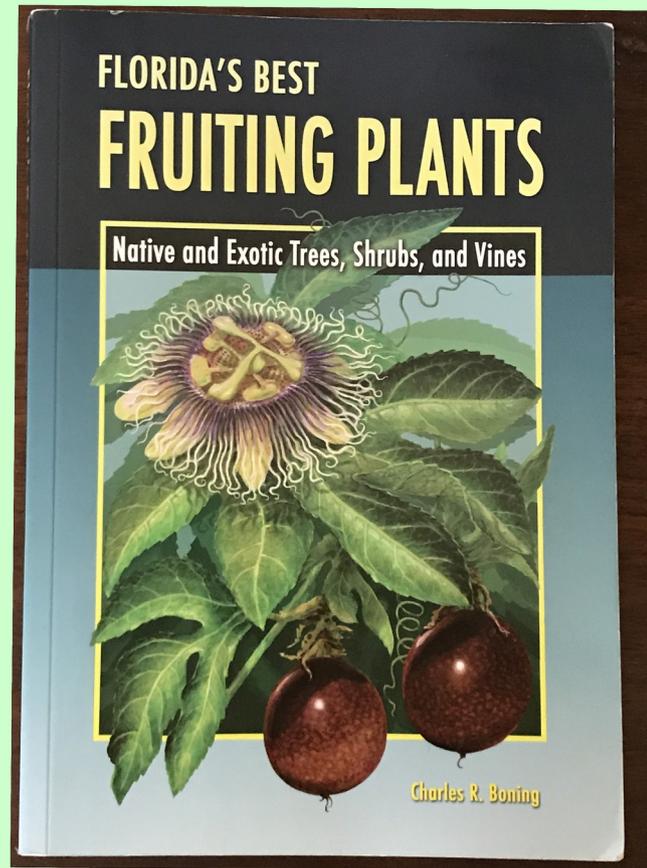
A Possible Urban Backyard Grove

(Don't buy any fruit or variety until you have tasted the fruit.)

1. Pickering Mango – a true dwarf, *disease-resistant* variety, with fine fruit. (The Ice Cream variety is dwarf, but not very disease-resistant in our region.)
2. Makok Sapodilla – a dwarfish, fine-tasting sapodilla. Fruit is picked unripe before raccoons and squirrels go after it, long season.
3. Trompo Canistel – fabulous tasting fruit, easy to grow, attractive tree, fruit is picked unripe, long season.
4. Day Avocado – dwarfish, cold-tolerant, productive, rich-tasting fruit.
5. Kary Carambola – shade tolerant, fine-tasting fruit not especially attractive to raccoons and squirrels, long fruiting season, beautiful tree.

An Excellent First Book

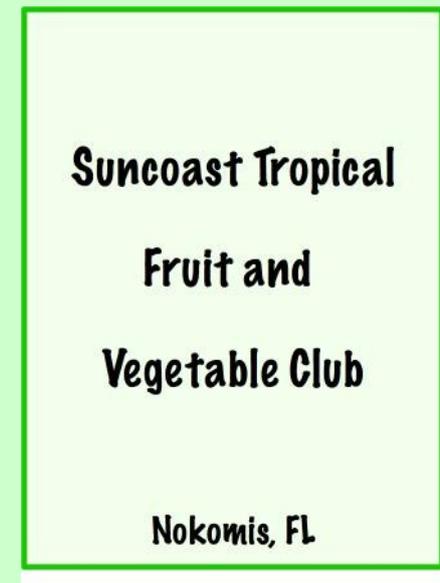
Florida's Best Fruiting Plants, by Charles Boning. Excellent, but be aware that the information on varieties is generally out of date.



Learn From Experienced Growers

Our area has excellent local fruit tree clubs:

- Tampa Bay Rare Fruit Council
- Tropical Fruit Society of Sarasota
- Manatee Rare Fruit Council
- Suncoast Tropical Fruit and Vegetable Club



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

Next class is Saturday, March 28, 1:30-4:30.



Online Information Sources

- YouTube videos – some are excellent, especially Richard Campbell’s videos on pruning of mango trees
- growables.org – lots of good information **specific to our region**
- For info on mango and avocado varieties, see Alex Salazar’s website, Tropical Acres Farms, and also the Pine Island Nursery website
- UF/IFAS publications – can be very informative, but are sometimes oriented toward commercial growers
- Tropical Fruit Forum – a discussion board
- It's a good idea to include the word “Florida” when you do a web search



Wildlife

1. There are some fruits such as sapodilla and canistel that don't seem to be bothered by wildlife. But for many fruits, you will eventually have raccoons, possums, squirrels, and/or birds, perhaps even deer, taking fruit from your trees.
2. There are hundreds of online ideas and products for deterring them--- repellents, hanging old DVD's on strings, firecrackers, flashing lights, ultrasound, etc. If you can find something like this that works for you, wonderful.
3. If not, the choices are barriers or population control.

Bagging

1. Protects 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 stopped by poultry netting, charged by a solar-cell battery (Intellishock). It is reasonably portable. Effective, although expensive. It does not stop squirrels, at least not completely.
3. The other main alternative is humane trapping and shooting (NOT relocating).



Squirrels and Birds

1. Squirrels are extremely destructive, sometimes spoiling much more fruit than they actually eat.
2. Unlike raccoons and possums, squirrels are very difficult to trap.
3. In my experience, after five or ten squirrels have been taken out by Mr. Pellet, the entire population will clear out from the property. Of course hungry scouts will eventually enter to test. I have been able to maintain reasonable control with only an occasional reminder example needed.
4. Birds can be very damaging to certain fruit, such as figs, jaboticabas, stone fruit, and berries--- but be aware that many species do not eat fruit, and may even eat pest insects or chase off fruit-eating species. Besides bagging, bird netting can be used. It is very cumbersome to put on and take off, and picks up pieces of debris like a magnet. Also, you should have a pellet gun available to euthanize birds that get hopelessly entangled (you will not be able to remove them without serious injury to the bird and possibly to yourself as well).