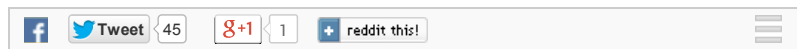


Fruit trees a tasty addition to city canopy

Apple trees are the No. 1 choice in southern Ontario



VIEW 2 PHOTOS

MARK CULLEN PHOTO

The McIntosh apple is the No. 1 choice for fruit trees in southern Ontario.

By: [Mark Cullen](#) Gardening, Published on Fri Jun 06 2014

Many people have been taking a long, hard look at their tree canopy after the damage wrought by last December's ice storm. Without an old tree, and large limbs that fell, many yards and gardens are now bathed in sunshine: the perfect opportunity to grow fruit trees.

Fruit trees 101: Here is your primer. Armed with this information you can wade into your local garden retailer and look over the selection of choice trees with confidence that you know something about the subject. Note that this is the best time of year to buy fruit trees. I have been looking for a Honey Crisp apple tree for five years and this was finally the year that I found one — but I had to get there early.

Apples: The No. 1 choice of tree fruit in southern Ontario is the apple. The McIntosh apple (the one you eat, not the computer) was developed here.

The most asked question is, "Do I need two apples to produce fruit." The short answer is: Yes. A lonely apple tree without a mate might produce *some* fruit but if there is another apple tree nearby and in full flower at the same time, both will produce a lot more apples. I call this "maximizing the fruit-bearing potential" of a tree. Truth is, here in Toronto there are so many crabapples and fruiting apple trees that pollination will occur most anywhere that you plant a single tree.

The second most-asked question relates to insects and disease: "Should I spray my tree?" and the short answer on this one is also yes. I have 40 apple trees in my 10-acre garden and I spray them all with dormant spray in April before the blossoms break open and after blossom drop (usually around the beginning of June). I apply a combination of End All insecticide and garden sulphur, or the lime sulphur that comes in the dormant spray kit.

There is a "but" to this answer, too. If you are growing a fruit tree in isolation from other trees of its family, the bugs and diseases will have a hard time finding it.

Other fruit: Pears, cherries and plums also fall into the cross-pollination category and need mates to maximize their fruiting. However, sour cherries, like Montmorency, are self fruitful and a Canadian introduction called Stella, which is classified as a sweet cherry, does not need a mate.

Speaking of other fruits, pears are the easiest fruit to grow. They generally do not like to be pruned, they are the least susceptible to insect and disease problems and every

second year they are overloaded with pears, for the most part.

Cherries are easy to grow, but birds love them. The big question from cherry growers is how to avoid this problem, as the birds inevitably know your cherries are ripe before you do. The answer is to drape a bird net over your tree and tie the four corners of it to the trunk to keep hungry birds from flying underneath the netting and getting trapped — and sometimes drunk on spoiled cherries.

Plums are interesting. There are Japanese plums (the red ones) and European plums which are purple. There are prune/plum varieties (prunes are first plums before they are dried) and if you want to grow plums to dry into prunes, you had better buy a variety that is bred for this purpose.

Plums are a member of the “prunus” family as are flowering cherries and the popular Purple Leafed plum. If your plum flowers at the same time as neighbouring ornamentals in the prunus family, you are in luck because the bees will ensure that pollination occurs and you will get fruit. Plant lots of bee-attracting flowers to make this happen.

Self-fruitful trees include peach, apricot and nectarine. You only need to plant one to get lots of fruit. They like to be pruned back hard after winter. I assess the winter damage on my trees each spring (now!) and prune out any dead wood, then I open the tree up to the sun and wind by pruning out the heaviest wood right down into the heart of the tree. This makes for odd-looking trees but great fruit.

Peaches are winter hardy in Toronto but only just. I speculate that many will have died back due to the severe cold this winter (it dropped to -27C this past Jan. 7. That is cold for a peach).

Apricots are the most winter-hardy and can grow in Ottawa (zone 4) while nectarines fall in between the peach and apricot in this regard.

Buying fruit trees: Buy Canadian-grown fruit trees. This provides some assurance that the tree is hardy to your area and suitable for growing in your weather and soil conditions. Read the label. Apple trees are usually sold as “dwarf” or “semi dwarf.”

Fruit trees are usually two years old when you buy them. They stand about a 1-1/2-to two-metres high in the pot. You are more likely to get earlier production from a young tree than an old one, due to the time it takes for the more mature tree to get over the transplant shock.

Plant all fruit trees in open, nutrient rich soil. Peaches really enjoy a soil mix that is 50 per cent sand. Never plant a fruit tree in a depression where water accumulates since none of them enjoy wet feet. Plant high, dig a wide hole about a metre in diameter and use three or four bags of quality planting soil mix. Stake your trees for the first three or four years and, in the fall, put a spiral plastic rodent protector on the trunk to prevent rabbit damage.

For a good read, I recommend the new book *Growing Urban Orchards*, by Susan Poizner. Susan explores the ups, downs and how-to's of fruit tree care in the city. She knows something about it as the director of [Orchard People](#) and founder and co-ordinator of Growing for Green, a voluntary organization that advocates urban gardening and, in 2009, planted Ben Nobleman Park Community Orchard — Toronto's first community orchard.

Green Tie: On Monday, June 9, the Toronto Parks and Trees Foundation will host their seventh annual Green Tie event, an evening of celebration, delicious food and entertainment “in the park” — Riverdale Park East. All event proceeds will support the Toronto Parks and Trees Recover The Canopy campaign.

www.torontoparksandtrees.org/

Mark Cullen is an expert gardener, author, broadcaster and garden editor of *Reno and Decor* magazine. Get his free monthly newsletter at markcullen.com, and watch him on CTV Canada AM every Wednesday at 8:45 a.m. Follow him on Twitter @MarkCullen4 and Facebook.