

Peaches and Nectarines

Although they have a reputation for being touchy, peaches can be grown in at least 30 states. Take care before planting peaches north of Zone 5, but don't rule them out. Check with your county extension office or nursery to find out if your part of the state and your favorite variety are compatible.

Varieties

Peaches come in two general categories: clingstone types have pits that stick to the flesh, even when the peach is fully ripe, and freestones--the more popular varieties--separate easily. You'll find a range of sizes, too. Some dwarf varieties grow no taller than four feet and resemble a bush. Semi-dwarf trees grow to about nine feet; standard, to around 18 feet.

Select a variety for your climate. Popular peach varieties include: Belle of Georgia, Elberta, Harbinger, Garnet Beauty, Sunhaven, Cresthaven, and Madison. Compact Red Haven is a reliable dwarf variety. For colder regions, try Oriole and Veteran. Reliance and Sunapee can take temperatures far below zero Fahrenheit, particularly in a protected spot, and are candidates for colder zones.

Nectarines, or fuzzless peaches, grow where other peaches do and take the same care. For early fruit, plant Pocahontas, Cherokee, Lexington, Redbud, and Surecrop are fairly frost-resistant.

Most peaches are self-fertile, so you can plant only one tree and still get a harvest. J.H. Hale, Mikado, Honeydew Hale, and Hal-Berta Giant are exceptions and will need a second variety planted nearby. Check a catalogue carefully because some of the newer varieties will need a partner to bear a crop of fruit.

Planting

Keep peach trees out of the direct path of winter. A slope facing north is ideal; trees won't be lured into premature growth by a warm spring day only to be crippled by an unexpected frost. Nestling trees near a building or behind a windbreak of evergreens helps protect them from the freezing effects of high winds.

The trees require well-drained soil. If soil is clayey, add sphagnum peat moss to soil in the planting hole. Choose well-branched and well-rooted year-old nursery stock about four feet tall. Plant them in early spring as soon as the frost danger has passed. Allow 25 feet between standard-size trees and ten to 15 between dwarf Varieties. Next, cut back the main stem of the new trees to about three feet from the ground. Prune off all other twigs, and stake trees until they're well established. Resist fertilizing new trees. Expect fruit the third season after Planting

Care and feeding

Keep mulch of straw, hay, sawdust, or similar material about six inches deep around peach trees. But pull the mulch away from the base in the fall to discourage rabbits and mice from nesting there. For additional protection, keep a rodent guard on the tree the year around.

Train peach trees to an open center, and keep the center of the tree free of dense growth. Prune annually while the tree is dormant. The part of the branch where the peaches grew last year won't fruit again, so prune to encourage new growth and top-notch peaches.

As the young fruit begins to form, thin them to about seven inches apart.

Insects and diseases

Tree borers and bacterial cankers can become serious problems. The preventive approach calls for regular applications of an all-purpose spray at pink and petal-fall stages, and at least three times thereafter at three-week intervals. To control leaf curl, apply ferbam (available from most garden centers and nurseries) when trees are dormant.

Harvesting

Allow peaches to ripen fully on the tree. Yellow-fleshed varieties are generally ready for picking when the skin changes from light green to yellow. To be certain, sample a peach or two before hauling out the bushel basket.