

Hardy Fruit Trees

by Robbie Anderman

Fruit trees are generally a long term agricultural investment, so pick your site well, and pick your tree even more carefully.

When I first moved to this area in 1969, there were apple, and some plum, orchards on every farm, even on most abandoned farms. The wide selection of varieties was awesome and all were hardy enough to endure the coldest weather this area could dish out.

Sadly, most of these orchards have succumbed to neglect, overgrowth of the forest, and clearing of the land for other crops. Still, they amply prove that this area can provide good habitat for hardy fruit trees. The first criteria one needs to consider when choosing a tree to plant, is whether it is sufficiently hardy to thrive in its intended location, not just survive. A handy reference is the Plant Hardiness Zone map of Agriculture Canada. The Arctic is Zone 0, while Windsor's banana belt is Zone 7a. Renfrew town is about 4b, Pembroke town is Zone 4a, Perth and Ottawa are in Zone 5, and western Renfrew County is Zone 3b or even 3a.

Each site will also be influenced by whether it faces south or north, whether it is exposed to strong winds, is close to a stabilizing large body of water, and whether it is close to a building, is at the bottom or top of a hill. Planting a tree that's not fully hardy to your location is playing the "horticultural lottery". Thankfully most nurseries and tree merchants do label their trees with "hardy to Zone X", so intelligent choices can be made before buying a tree. There are also numerous publications by Ag Canada and OMAFRA, plus books by orchardists which describe not only the hardiness zones for many varieties, yet also the other taste, color and size qualities.

It's worth keeping in mind, even while considering the climate changes we're enduring, that there have been "Test Winters" (1904, 1917, 1934 & 1981) which were especially cold, proving which varieties really will survive in an area. We lost several great trees with delicious fruit in 1981, the same year that 30% of all commercial apple trees in Quebec died. Bartlett pears also proved they could not be a guaranteed survivor in the Upper Ottawa Valley.

Thankfully, there are many excellent hardy varieties of apple, pear, cherry and plum that have been developed by orchardists in Canada and the northern USA over the past many years. Challenged by adversity, they arose to it and came thru with flying colors of good fruit for most every locale. I have sought out the research of the Prairie orchardists and found many varieties that are very happy in Zone 3a, while taking a chance in the horticultural lottery with a couple from Zone 4.

For pear trees, I suggest planting trees with rootstocks of *Pyrus Ussurienses* (Harbin Pear). These are from a region of Northern China/ Siberia which missed the last Ice Age, thus had a longer time to develop true hardiness. Their genes have been bred into many varieties that are also on the market. They have the benefit as well of being immune to Fire Blight, the scourge of European pears, as well as not attracting many bugs or other diseases.

When planting, keep these principles in mind: Plant your trees far enough apart so they will not touch each other's branches when they are fully mature (yes that little tree will spread to 25 feet wide), plan for good drainage, dig the hole 2 - 2.5 feet deep and wide enough to fit all the roots without bending, put the top soil on the bottom & the sub soil on the top, keep the roots wet until well planted and then

water 2 -3 gallons when the hole is half filled and another 2 - 3 gallons when fully planted, then pack the soil well to eliminate all air pockets.

After planting, it's best to water with 5+ gallons 2 -3 times a week minimum for the first growing season. Remember that 90% of the feeder roots are in the top 6 inches of soil. Mulch the "drip line" (outer extent of the branches) well with hay, straw, or rotten old sawdust to help maintain moisture, encourage decomposition right where the feeder roots are, and to help keep the weeds and grass down. Do keep this mulch at least a foot away from the trunk so as not to provide rodents a home with "lunch" too nearby.

With this in mind, do put a plastic or hardware cloth wrap around the tree before winter to discourage rodents and rabbits, and at least as high as the snow drifts in that particular spot. To deter deer, a fence higher and wider than the baby tree is, with three tall stakes will work, though it may need raising as the tree grows. An electric fence will do the necessary work for larger plantings, and even keep away the bears. Obviously we're growing tasty good food.

Well composted manure placed under the mulch before mid-June is the best fertilizer, though foliar feeding before mid-summer, and kelp & ground-up rock mineral soil amendments are also excellent to include under the mulch.

Organic fruit has been called the "Final Frontier of Agriculture", as it is very challenging, especially apples, yet worth it in taste and health safety. It's the way our great-grandparents grew their orchards, though incorporating many new beneficial techniques. www.groworganicapples.com is a great resource to help with this, as is their book "The Apple Grower".

Integrated pest management (IPM) is another growing practice that is popular and helps keep down the application of chemicals, and their costs.

If you are fortunate enough to live on a farm with an old orchard, it is well worth the effort to regenerate it. First cutting all underbrush and shading trees within 50 feet, then cutting out the dead wood, followed by clearing up the middle so you can climb the tree and the sun and air movement can penetrate it. Using lots of good hay as mulch has been proven in studies to be enough good fertilizer and provides enough habitat restoration to bring them back to health and good productivity.

It can take a new tree 5 to 10 years to come into production, depending on whether it is semi-dwarf or standard. A well maintained standard tree can produce good fruit for about 100 years. Hardy fruit trees provide a great return on investment.

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