

Friday's Feature

By

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February 1, 2009

Choose fruit tree varieties with care

Late fall through winter in Northwest Florida is a great time for planting fruit trees. There are several kinds that work well in backyard landscapes. However, not every fruit tree will grow and reliably produce in our area.

Climate is probably the most important factor determining where certain fruits can be grown. Most fruits grown in the northern part of Florida are deciduous, which means that during the winter, plants lose their leaves and go into a period of dormancy or rest. During this rest period, the plant must be exposed to chilling temperatures. This exposure to cold prepares the plant to resume active growth in spring.

Temperatures below 45 degrees F accumulated throughout the winter determines the total hours of chilling. Species differ in the amount of chilling they need in order to completely rest and resume growth. Sparse foliage, few to no flowers and poor fruit production result from not enough chill hours. Santa Rosa County receives between 550 to 700 chill hours during the average winter. Check with your local Extension Service for the chilling hours in your area.

It is wise to do your homework before purchasing and planting fruit in North Florida. Which fruit varieties grow well here is probably the most important question to ask before deciding what to plant. How much care is needed to grow this type of fruit? Do I have time to devote to pruning, spraying, fertilizing and watering? To find the answers to these questions, talk to a knowledgeable employee at a local, reputable nursery, contact your local UF/IFAS Extension Office or visit <http://trec.ifas.ufl.edu/fruitscapes/temperate.html> before choosing which fruit to plant.

Figs are one of the most popular fruits in the South. Besides being low-maintenance, they also are one of the fruits most adapted to the Gulf States. They prefer a well-drained site but adapt to a wide range of soil conditions. The main varieties are Brown Turkey, Celeste, Green Ischia, Magnolia and San Piero.



Figs perform well in Northwest Florida
Photo credit: Theresa Friday

Figs prefer full sun, but partial sun to partial shade is acceptable. Add mulch to insulate the root system during the winter and conserve soil moisture in the summer. Prune the trees occasionally to keep them at a manageable height.

Citrus is becoming more and more popular. Popular satsuma varieties include Owari and Brown Select, which mature in November. Kumquats mature in late November and early to mid-December. Meiwa is a common kumquat variety.

Citrus needs full to partial sun for best fruit production. They adapt to many soil types and to container gardening as well.

Blueberries are a low-maintenance, bush-type fruit species. These plants need acid soil, and their shallow, fibrous root systems benefit from mulch. They prefer full sun.

Recommended blueberry varieties for Florida include Premier, Tifblue, Climax and Brightwell. Plant two or more varieties to guarantee cross-pollination and good fruit development. Most blueberry plants will produce a good fruit crop by the third year after planting.

Persimmons for our area include native and oriental varieties with the oriental being preferred. Oriental persimmon fruit is seven to 10 times larger than native persimmon fruit. Persimmons are best adapted to partial sun or partial shade. Hana Fuyu and Fuyu are popular varieties.

Most retail garden centers have good availability of fruit trees from November through February. So take advantage of this time of year to add some fruit varieties to your backyard plantings.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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