



## Home Orchards: Choosing the Perfect Trees to Fit your Needs

by *Carlas Hill, UC Master Gardener*

You have a vision of a beautiful home orchard and the wonderful bounty to be had from it: pies, cobblers and fresh fruit for eating out of your hand. You have the desire and the space -- but where to start?

Now is the perfect time to select and plant your trees. Bare root season is upon us, and it's fairly short. Most fruit trees are shipped by the commercial grower and planted by the home gardener while still dormant and before their buds start swelling. January to early March is typically the ideal time to buy and to plant your bare root stock.



Selection of trees

A local nursery is the best place to start, and most likely the best source of information about fruit tree varieties for our area. We are fortunate enough to live in the south San Joaquin Valley, which is home to many commercial growers that provide the bare root trees, sold at local nurseries as well as across the nation. Purchasing from a local nursery puts you in touch with individuals who know the best varieties to suggest for our area, and who would most likely carry some lesser-known selections for that same reason. These plants will be more in sync with our seasonal rhythms. Garden centers at national retail stores are improving, but they typically offer a less specific palette of varieties.

Some people order their bare root trees online or through mail catalogs, and their plants are shipped to them. However, if you pick them up from the nursery yourself, you can inspect them to be sure that they have been freshly dug and placed in moist sand to keep the bare roots moist. These plants are young and ready to grow. If you purchase a container fruit tree that was potted up last year, it will most likely be root-bound in the pot; an undesirable condition.

Knowing your specific Climate Zone is important, as it is the first consideration necessary when choosing the right fruit trees for a particular area. USDA Climate Zones are determined by average minimum yearly low temperatures. These are only guidelines, though, as your individual location may have a significant influence on your overall zone. Most home gardeners use *Sunset's Western Garden Book's Climate Zones*. For example: our valley floor is in Zone 8; the citrus belt is in Zone 9; and the foothills are in Zone 7.



Bare root tree, UC Riverside

Another reason to buy from local nurseries is that nursery employees know the Climate Zones in which we grow plants, and the average number of chilling hours below 45 degrees in our zones. Deciduous fruit trees require a certain number of “chilling hours” in winter months in order for buds to bloom, set fruit and grow well in the following year. Most varieties require between 200 and 2000 chilling hours in the winter to break dormancy in a normal manner. This is the type of material that is usually found on the tree’s informational tag. The valley floor typically averages between 700 and 800 chilling hours per year (though we have had less than that this winter).



Close up of peach blossoms

Be sure to check and see whether the trees you purchase are self-fertile or, if they will need a pollinizer variety. Trees that are self-fertile, such as apricot, peach, nectarine and quince trees, will set a good fruit crop when pollinated by flowers on the same tree -- which means that only one tree is needed in the garden. Apples and pears are generally cross-fertile, which means that one variety is pollinated by a different variety of the same fruit. In this case, you will need two or more varieties of apples to get a crop. When choosing varieties for cross-pollination, be sure their bloom-time overlaps. Some varieties of apples, such as Gravenstein, have sterile pollen. This means that they will not pollinate themselves or other apple trees, and they will need pollen from another apple tree in order to produce fruit. These topics are beneficial to discuss with nursery employees when you purchase your trees. They can tell you whether your tree will need a pollinizer variety. If it does, someone from the nursery will most likely be able to recommend a beneficial variety and give you some planting tips. Be aware that fruit tree blossoms will be attractive to bees, and these creatures help spread pollen within a tree and between trees. Bees are the pollinators.

To determine spacing requirements when planting, you need to know the ultimate height you want from your fruit tree. The trend in home orchards today is to keep a shorter tree (by pruning to about 12’ tall), or to plant semi-dwarfs with a height range of 12’ to 16’. With that total growth, 12’ to 16’ apart would be adequate spacing between trees. Other planting methods (look into backyard orchard culture) may allow closer spacing, but require careful tree management. If you summer prune for height control, the trees can be planted closer together.

If you want to do some planning before going to the nursery, the University of California offers some excellent resources for the selection and care of fruit trees. The Home Orchard is for sale at the Tulare County Cooperative Extension Office, or online at: <http://anrcatalog.ucdavis.edu>. Online information from the University can be found at the California Backyard Orchard website, at: <http://homeorchard.ucanr.edu/>

With a little planning, choosing the best fruit trees to meet your needs will become easy. In addition, growing the new trees in your home orchard will be rewarding.

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