

Now's the Time to Plant for Summer-sweet Peaches and Nectarines

By Nanette Londeree



Sun-warmed, plump juicy peaches, right off the tree - what a tasty treat! And nectarines too! You can grow both of these luscious orbs right in your own back yard. Whether a full sized or dwarf tree, or trained into espaliers, with some planning and care, you can be plucking ripe fruit off the tree in the next few years. In addition, you'll get beautiful springtime blossoms and striking leaf color in the fall.

Peaches (*Prunus persica*) have a fuzzy skin with yellow to nearly white sweet flesh, while nectarines (*Prunus persica* var. *nucipersica*) are their smooth-skinned cousins, usually smaller, with more red color on the surface, yellow, red, pink or white flesh and supposedly a stronger aroma. Often referred to as the "Queen" of the fruits and second only to apples in popularity as a deciduous tree fruit, peaches have been grown in Asia for more than two thousand years, and produced for centuries in the United States. Fresh peaches provide vitamins A and C in addition to potassium and fiber; nectarines provide twice the vitamin A, slightly more vitamin C, and much more potassium than their velvety-skinned cousins.

There are hundreds of different peach varieties that fall in two basic groups - the freestones and the clingstones. The freestone types have flesh that separates readily from the pit, while the clingstone type, aptly named, has flesh that clings tightly to the pit. Trees do best in areas with full sun, good air movement and well-drained, fertile soil. If possible, plant in a location with a high elevation so that cold air can drain away from the tree on a cold night during bloom. Trees need watering, fruit thinning and adequate summer heat to properly ripen fruit. They're self-fertile, so only a single tree is needed to bear fruit.

In choosing a variety of peach or nectarine right for your conditions, consider the chilling requirements - the number of hours that the air temperature is below 45° F. Without adequate chilling, there may be a delay in the tree leafing out and uneven fruit development. Relatedly, late frosts can damage newly developing flowers and fruit, as peaches and nectarines bloom early.

You can find the best selection of varieties this time of year as nurseries offer bareroot trees. Look for trees three to four feet in height with a good root system and a trunk caliper of 3/8 to 1/2 inch. Varieties that grow well in our area include:

Peaches

- Babcock - Medium-sized. White flesh. Freestone, low chill variety.
- Earligrande - Excellent flavor. Yellow-red blush. Semi-freestone, low chill variety.
- Fairtime - Large fruit. Yellow, firm flesh. Excellent flavor.
- Indian Blood - Cling peach. Red skin and flesh. Tart. Prolific.
- La Feliciano - Medium-sized. Firm, red. Excellent flavor. Somewhat more disease resistant.
- Loring - Very large fruit. Red skin. Yellow flesh. Freestone. Somewhat more disease resistant.
- Nectar - White flesh. Pink skin. Excellent flavor.
- O'Henry - One of the best. Large fruit. Yellow flesh. Freestone.
- Suncrest - Large fruit. Yellow flesh. Freestone. Midseason.
- Veteran - Red blush. Elberta-type. Freestone. Dependable, heavy producer, excellent flavor. Somewhat more disease resistant.

Nectarines:

- Arctic Glo - Small, fantastic flavor. White flesh. Early
- Fantasia - Large, brightly-colored yellow freestone. Late.
- Flamekist - Excellent quality. Large, firm, yellow, clingstone.
- Flavortop - Large, excellent flavor. Yellow freestone. Mid-season.
- Goldmine - Large, great flavor. White flesh. Freestone.
- Heavenly White - Large, excellent flavor. White flesh.
- Red Gold - Large, excellent flavor. Stores well. Late.
- Rose - Old favorite white freestone with excellent flavor and low chilling requirement.
- September Red - Large, yellow. Very late.
- Summer Grand - One of the best. Large, yellow freestone.

Both peaches and nectarines are susceptible to a variety of pests with peach leaf curl being one of the most common. This fungal disease can be a serious problem for both peaches and nectarines, affecting their blossoms, fruit, leaves, and shoots, especially on many of the low-chilling varieties. The disease can be kept under reasonable control by applying fungicide (a Bordeaux mixture or copper solution) every year after leaves have fallen; an additional application may be required when spring weather is unusually wet.