



## Grow a Plum or Pluot in your Garden

by Thea Fiskin, UC Master Gardener

There are approximately 250 varieties of plums grown in California. They thrive in the San Joaquin Valley, are one of the easiest fruit trees to grow in the home garden, and are delicious to eat. There are two main categories of plums: European, *Prunus domestica*, and Japanese, *Prunus salicina*. There are also hybrids known as Pluots, which are a cross between a plum and apricot. Plums can be as small as a cherry or as large as a baseball, depending on the variety. The ripening season is June thru October. Japanese plum varieties ripen first; pluot varieties usually ripen at the end of summer. Plums and pluots can be enjoyed fresh, dried, or canned as jelly, jam or as juice.



European plums were probably introduced to the United States by the pilgrims, and might have been on the Thanksgiving menu in 1621. Fruits of European plums varieties can be yellow, red or green, but purple-blue are the most common. Most European plums do not require a pollinator. Have you ever wondered what the difference is between a plum and a prune? The answer is none--prunes are European plums that have been dried. Prunes are usually made from the varieties richest in sugar, which are the French, Imperial, Italian and Green Gage.

Japanese plums are originally from China and were introduced to the United States in the 1870's. Generally, they are larger, rounder (or heart shaped), and firmer than the European. They are also more disease-resistant and vigorous. Varieties of Japanese plum fruits are yellow or light red, but never purple-blue. Japanese plums will produce better crops when cross-pollinated. In my garden, I have an Elephant Heart and a Santa Rosa plum as the cross pollinator, they both have excellent flavor. Here are a few other great plums, but there are many more:

- **Burgundy** - Red skin and flesh. Self-fertile.
- **Golden Nectar** - Large. Yellow flesh. Tender skin. Great flavor. Japanese plum.
- **Red Beauty** - Red skin, yellow flesh, excellent flavor.
- **Sprite Cherry Plum** - Black, sweet skin. Exotic flavor. Small.

Pluots are genetically one-fourth apricot and three-fourths plum. The fruit's smooth skin closely resembles a plum--it is solid or speckled and ranges in color from yellow-green to black. Pluot flesh is white to red. Pluots are generally larger than plums and higher in sugar content; they are a flavor delight.

Pluots, like plums, will need a pollinator of a different variety for good fruit set. Most will pollinize with another pluot, or certain varieties of plum. There are approximately 20 varieties of pluots. Here is a small list of varieties that are taste-favorites and will cross-pollinate with a Santa Rosa plum.

- Dapple Dandy
- Emerald Drop
- Flavor Finale
- Flavor Grenade
- Flavor King
- Flavor Supreme
- Splash

January is the best time to purchase a tree, since they are available in all the local nurseries as bare-root trees, which makes them much more economical than purchasing in a container. The UC Davis website has a list of varieties suitable for planting in a home orchard at: <http://homeorchard.ucanr.edu/>.



Standard plum trees can reach 30 feet tall and 25 feet wide, but for the home garden, it is much more convenient to keep the trees smaller with pruning (who wants to climb 30 feet to pick fruit, and how much fruit do you need for home consumption?).

Winter is the time to prune plum and pluot trees. Remove any diseased or broken limbs and prune any overly-long shoots by either heading them back to a side shoot or removing them altogether. Thin out remaining branches for shape. Winter is also the time to spray plum and pluot trees with a dormant oil to control aphids, mites, scale and any other pest eggs that might be overwintering.

In the spring, spray the tree as blossoms appear with a fungicide to control brown rot. If we are lucky enough to get rain, several treatments will be needed. Follow the fungicide instructions exactly. Another important spring chore is to thin the fruit when they are marble-sized. Thin the fruits to about 6 inches apart to prevent limb breakage and have larger, better quality fruit, or farther apart for even larger fruit.

Fertilize young trees monthly (April-July), using less fertilizer with older trees. Maintain the area around the tree weed-free with mulch, being careful to keep the mulch itself a slight distance away from the trunk of the tree. Irrigate deeply, every 2-3 weeks.

During the summer season, continue to watch for aphids; a sure sign is curled leaves. Remove vigorous shoots from the interior of the tree to allow air and light to penetrate the tree's interior. Let beneficial insects prey upon aphids or hose them off with water. Then wait for the fruit to ripen.

If you don't have a plum tree in your garden, maybe this would be a great time to add one or two! Happy Gardening!