

How Can I Tell If My Fruit Trees Need Pollinators?

Leimone Waite, Master Gardener, May 3, 2019

Q. I recently moved into a new home that had several fruit trees, and I have added more fruit trees this spring. How can I tell which fruit trees in my new home will need pollinators and which won't?

A. I am assuming that you are asking about which of your fruit trees will require another compatible tree to pollinate the tree and not about honeybees or another insect that would help pollinate the flowers. Almost all fruit trees will require some help from insect pollinators to have a good fruit crop.

Most peaches, nectarines, apricots, plums, citrus, figs, sour cherries, persimmons, quince and pomegranates don't need pollinizers (compatible trees for pollination). They are what horticulturalists call self-fertile.



A healthy peach tree bears healthy fruit. (Photo: Jenna Waite)

The tree varieties that will need a pollinizer are apples and pears, Asian pears, sweet cherries, nuts, as well as some peaches, apricots, plums and blueberries. These types of fruit trees are self-sterile or at best partially self-fertile and do need pollen from another tree variety to produce fruit.

Pollinizer trees bloom at the same time and are in the same genus but are of a different species or variety. For example,

a Honeycrisp apple would need pollen from a Granny Smith Apple or another variety that blooms at this same time to produce fruit.



Premier Honeycrisp apple (Photo: SHAWN DOWD/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE)

If you have limited room in your orchard and only have space for one favorite variety of self-sterile apple or sweet cherry, you can graft another variety onto your tree, to serve as a pollinator, or better yet purchase a tree that is a "three in one" or "fruit cocktail tree", meaning that it has three different varieties on one tree. One of the varieties is chosen to serve as a pollinizer for the other two.

If you already have a tree growing but you discover that needs a pollinizer to produce, gather blossoms from a tree variety that can serve as a pollinator for your tree. Place these blossoms in a container with water that can hang in the tree while it's in bloom, so bees can move easily from the blossoms in the container to the tree's blossoms and back.



Bees are hard at work at Trigger Happy Ranch. (Photo: Jack Work/Contributed)

I recommend that you check the pollination needs of any tree before you buy, to save yourself this trouble. And in many cases if you find that the tree does need another tree to pollinate it, you can often purchase fruit trees with pollinating varieties already grafted onto them.

To find out more information about different fruit trees visit the University of California, The California Backyard

Orchard on the web: http://homeorchard.ucanr.edu/Fruits_&_Nuts/

Many nursery sites also have good information about pollination needs of the trees that they sell such as Dave Wilson Nurseries at <https://www.davewilson.com/product-information/category/fruit-trees>.

The Shasta Master Gardeners Program can be reached by phone at 242-2219 or email mastergardener@shastacollege.edu. The gardener office is staffed by volunteers trained by the University of California to answer gardeners' questions using information based on scientific research.