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## Tips for growing fruit trees that thrive in containers

By SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS  
FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT



The easiest fruits to grow in pots are actually not trees, but smaller plants and bushes like strawberries, blueberries and raspberries Robbi Pengelly / Sonoma Index Tribune

**Question:** I'd like to grow my own fruit trees, but I'm short on space. Can I grow fruit trees in containers?

**Answer:** We're happy to say yes, you can. One of the great pleasures in life is picking sun-ripened fruit from your own tree. While growing a tree in the ground is typically easier, many of us don't have the space or permission to do so. Growing fruit trees in pots is a little more challenging, but still very possible.

The easiest fruits to grow in pots are actually not trees, but smaller plants and bushes like strawberries, blueberries, and raspberries. You may want to try your hand at these first. Historically, citrus trees have been grown in pots since the 1600s, when the famous Orangerie was designed for King Louis XIV on the grounds of the Versailles Palace.

Dwarf trees are small trees that yield normal size fruit. You can easily find dwarf and semi-dwarf citrus varieties that can produce loads of fruit. Deciduous fruit trees, such as cherries, peaches, apples, pomegranates and figs can also be grown in containers. If you're feeling adventurous and up for more of a challenge, you could try growing frost-tender semi-tropical and tropicals like guavas, or if you have room for a larger container, avocados and mangoes.



Blueberries growing in a pot on a patio garden near Langley, Washington. Dean Fosdick via AP.

**Container size and type.** Consider the container cost, weight, and durability. Plastic nursery pots are inexpensive and lightweight. By starting a tree in a 15-gallon nursery pot, you decrease how often the tree needs watering while giving the tree enough room to size up and yield fruit. You can also use large terracotta pots, half wine barrels, or build raised boxes out of wood. Then use wheeled caddies or a dolly to move the container around fairly easily when you need to optimize the tree's exposure to sun. Whatever container type you use, always make sure there are holes in the bottom for drainage.

**Soil, mulch and compost.** Choose a potting soil that is well-draining yet retains moisture. After planting the tree, cover the surface of the potting soil with a layer of compost topped with wood chip mulch. This organic matter retains soil moisture and slowly breaks down, adding nutrients to feed the micro-organisms in the soil. Your potted tree will benefit from repeat additions of compost, worm castings, and organic fertilizer every 1 to 2 months through the spring and summer.

**Watering:** For most fruit trees, keep the soil moist but not soggy. If you only have a few containers and you don't travel much, you may choose to hand water. Otherwise, drip irrigation tubing is the most efficient way to go.

**Light:** Most fruit trees prefer at least 6 to 8 hours of direct sunlight each day; citrus trees thrive on up to 12 hours. By increasing sunlight exposure you increase your chances for getting greater yields and sweeter fruit.

**Temperature:** To assure good flowering in the spring, deciduous fruit trees require a certain number of hours growing at temperatures between 32 degrees and 45 degrees, known as chill hours. Keep those trees outdoors. Tropical and subtropical plants and trees like bananas, guavas, avocados, and mangoes don't need chill hours. In fact when frost is predicted place those trees against the house, under an overhang, or drape them with incandescent holiday lights and cover them with a frost blanket.

**Managing tree size.** Look for dwarf varieties, such as 'Black Jack' fig or 'Necta Zee' nectarine. You can pot non-dwarfing varieties, too. They are automatically dwarfed due to the restricted root ball, from living in a container. Prune branches back to check tree size.

Over time the roots may get too congested. You might notice the tree is not growing much or that roots are protruding from the bottom of the pot. At that point, you have three main options: take the tree out of the pot, trim the roots, and put it back in the same pot with some new potting soil; move the tree into a larger pot, or plant the tree in the ground.

While growing fruit trees in containers can be a little more challenging than growing them in the ground, it is quite achievable and worth the effort. These tips should help you start growing and enjoying some of your favorite fruit.

See also:

Growing Dwarf Citrus: [bit.ly/4amqQep](https://bit.ly/4amqQep)

Growing Fruit Crops in Containers: [bit.ly/3E0NbSR](https://bit.ly/3E0NbSR)

Fruit tree care: [bit.ly/3PGC2cr](https://bit.ly/3PGC2cr)

*Contributors to this week's column were Jeffrey Pierce, Patricia Decker and Karen Felker. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County [sonomamg.ucanr.edu/](https://sonomamg.ucanr.edu/) provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to [scmgpd@gmail.com](mailto:scmgpd@gmail.com). You will receive answers to your questions either in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at 707-565-2608 or [mqsonoma@ucanr.edu](mailto:mqsonoma@ucanr.edu).*