



ASK A MASTER GARDENER

CHERRY TREE CHILLING REQUIREMENTS

By Gay Wilhelm, Placer County Master Gardener

Q What are the chilling requirements for my cherry tree?

A Deciduous trees, which include fruit trees, begin a period of dormancy when daylight hours decrease in the fall. To break this dormancy and produce the necessary buds and shoots, a critical number of hours of cold temperature are needed. This usually involves 200 to 800 hours of cold temperature below 45 degrees F. This process is called vernalization.

Mild winters can create havoc with fruit tree yields. December and January are the most critical months. If each month has approximately 400 hours of temperature below 45 degrees and the cold is evenly spaced, the tree will have better yields. If warm temperatures arrive for even a few days during these months, the effectiveness of chilling may be reduced. Greater seasonal totals of cold weather may be needed if warm sunny days are extended. Our foggy weather in the valley often provides temperatures under 45 degrees assisting adequate chilling hours.

Through plant hybridizing, new varieties have been developed that require less chilling hours. This development has enabled fruit production in warmer winter areas.

Cherries tend to have very high chilling requirements, between 700 to 800 hours or about 28-32 days continuously exposed to 45 degrees or less for sweet cherries and over 1200 hours or 48 days for sour cherries. Be sure to check your variety for the amount of chilling hours required and appropriateness for your area.

Other considerations when considering planting cherry trees include careful consideration of varieties for fertilization. Two trees are needed for fertilization and not all varieties will pollinate each other. Cherry trees are very particular about good drainage. Pick an appropriate area when planting. Fruit production can take between 4 and 6 years. Cherry trees also cannot take extreme heat or intense winter cold. Rain in early spring can be detrimental to fruit production since cherries are one of the first trees to bloom.

With that said, there is nothing like fresh cherries from your own backyard. The challenge of growing cherries is overshadowed by the fresh taste of a juicy cherry. The weather has cooperated so far this winter. Now we need to survive the spring rains. Good luck. I'll let you know how my tree does this year.

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