

Myths About When to Plant Fruit Trees in the South, Set a New Pattern

One of the most frequently discussed topics at the nursery is;” When the correct time to plant a fruit tree?” We often deal with people that have recently moved south from regions that are colder than ours, who are used to planting trees in the spring, or people that are used to planting bare root fruit trees in the winter. Here in the Deep South zone 7 to 11, we experience warm falls and mild winters. Unlike up north our ground never freezes solid, so year round planting is possible. Although you can plant the year round, some times of the year are better than others.

Here’s a rundown to the planting seasons in our area...

BEST TIME TO PLANT IS FALL: Fall is when most fruit trees begin their most active root growth. The weather is cooling, and we’re still getting rain. It is at this time that you will get the most root growth. Trees established in fall are better able to survive the heat of the following summer. Fall is also the best time to obtain the largest selection of fruit trees, many of the most popular varieties and rarer fruits are sold to early buyers, so it pays to be an early bird when shopping for fruit trees.

SECOND BEST TIME IS WINTER: Winter planted fruit trees are still producing lots of new root growth, and the cooler weather requires less watering to keep the tree stable.

THIRD BEST TIME IS SPRING: Late Spring turns out to be a stressful time to plant as the trees are beginning active top growth, and we are getting little rain, so if you choose this time of the year pay close attention to watering. Spring is a great season to plant fruits that are tender to cold weather like pomegranates, bananas, and citrus.

FOURTH BEST TIME IS SUMMER: Summer is our wet season, but summer rains can be erratic. It’s a good season to plant if you have an irrigation system, but if you’re relying on hand watering pay close attention as your trees can be lost in just a few dry days.

There are some situations when there are better times than fall to plant. Fruit trees that are subject to being lost in to freezes, like banana, pomegranate and citrus, can be planted in fall and will be a more stable plant in spring, but they must be protected during hard freezes to insure the plant is not lost. If you are a busy person and covering plants is difficult, then wait and plant this group in the spring.

What to buy? Container verses bare root. Fruit trees are available in two forms, container grown and bare root. Up until 40 years ago most fruit trees were only obtainable as bare root trees. These trees are grown in open fields and dug during the winter dormant season. The planting window of a bare root tree is very short and to be

successful you really need to have them in the ground in the mid-December to mid-February window in the North Florida area. Bare root trees are easily lost if they are not properly handled. Having no dirt on the root means they need to be kept packed in moist material until they are planted. Bare root plants also can be more easily lost while transplanting as the majority of the roots have been removed during digging, requiring the plant to work double time to reestablish a new root system and get used to a new location. They also require a longer time frame to come into bearing than a container grown tree. The majority of fruit trees sold to home owners today are container grown; these trees can be planted year round. They offer the home orchardist a more stable plant with a complete root system that has not been traumatized. The drawback to container trees are there is real danger of buying a tree that has been held too long in its container. Avoid buying trees that have mossy bark or large roots that are visible on the surface of the root ball. When planting, be sure to trim any swirling large roots on the outside of the root ball to insure your plants longevity in the ground.

Ground preparation is also important. A fruit orchard is a long term project. It pays to know what type of soil you have. Having a soil test run on your yard is an inexpensive investment in the success of your orchard. It will tell you what your soil pH is, and will recommend soil amendments to make the fruit trees you've chosen happy. Soil kits for testing your soil can be obtained at your local county extension office, and it usually only takes a few weeks to get the results back. Growing your own fruit is a fun, relaxing hobby that can reward you with healthy food. There is no way to eat more locally than eating fruit out of your own yard.