

## Bearing Fruit

Add Fragrance and Flavor to Your Landscape With a Few Easy Trees

By *Adrian Higgins*  
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The apple looms large in the folklore of our gardens, and there was a time when every back yard had its version of an apple orchard. But for all its bounty and beauty, the apple tree is not as revered as it once was. With reason.

Plump, unblemished apples come with a price: They must be sprayed to avoid inevitable disfigurement or infestation by pests and diseases. The search for the perfect peach may be even more elusive. In our hot and humid climate, developing peaches can be counted on to rot in the absence of chemical intervention.

The worst fruits for the home? The apricot and the nectarine, says Mike McConkey, a fruit tree nurseryman in Afton, in the foothills of Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains. The apricot tends to bloom so early that its flowers (and future fruit) are killed by frost. The nectarine, devoid of protective fuzz, is prone to brown rot. Then there's the pear tree, a plant susceptible to a potentially fatal bacterial disease, called fire blight because the blackened twigs look scorched. A weevil named the plum curculio lays eggs in the fruit -- if, that is, it can't find an apple or peach first.

So what's a fruit lover to do in this age of environmental consciousness?

Other trees and bushes will produce fruit without the chemical dependency of traditional orchard fruits and, because many are handsome and smaller plants in their own right, they can be integrated into the landscape.

Cheryl Corson, a landscape architect in Upper Marlboro, said "you can do all kinds of great things" with edible plants in the landscape. She moved to a property that had a grape arbor and a native fruiting shrub called the Juneberry. "Usually I don't get to the berries as fast as the birds," she said. "It's a sharing system."

She also has a mature Asian pear tree, which, while not immune to fire blight, has been disease-free.

"There's no reason to have one place for fruit plants and another for ornamentals, because a lot of your fruit trees are ornamental," said Lee Reich, horticulturist and champion of the fruit less traveled. He wrote "Uncommon Fruits for Every Garden" five years ago (Timber Press) and recently published "Landscaping With Fruit" (Storey).



The jujube or Chinese date is an easy-to-grow fruit. (Eastern Shore Nursery of Virginia)

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Nick Covatta, a wholesale grower of fruit plants near Chincoteague, Va., said "the popularity of easy-to-care-for fruit has been very strong." He listed blueberries, blackberries, raspberries, figs and Asian persimmons as examples. "If I had to say what's king of all the small fruits, it's blueberries," he said. "I think the antioxidant aspect of blueberries attracts people," said Covatta, of Eastern Shore Nursery of Virginia. He has shifted from producing small bushes in two-gallon containers to larger ones in five-gallon pots because of the blueberry's status

as an ornamental and fruiting shrub.

Corson has a large apple tree that is welcomed in spite of the inglorious nature of its unsprayed fruit. The deer eat the apples and avoid her vegetable garden, which gets to another aspect of planting fruit trees: "It feeds humans, insect, birds," she said. "It doesn't matter who gets the harvest; what matters is that there is one."

Here's the lowdown for growing fruit trees as landscape plants.

### Blueberries

The blueberry has it all: It's a native shrub with pretty white blossoms in April, delicious fruit in summer, stunning autumn leaf color and red twigs in winter.

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Varieties fall into three basic groups: high bush, low bush and rabbiteye. Rabbiteye varieties are large shrubs favored in the South because they can stand hot, humid climates better than the other types. The quality of the fruit is not as high, though McConkey, whose nursery is called Edible Landscaping, said varieties and hybrids have been developed that are on a par with high bush types. "Columbus and Yadkin are really good," he said.

High bush varieties will grow here, but you can't stick them in raw clay and expect them to survive. Blueberries have two basic requirements: an acid soil between 4.5 and 5.5 pH and, given their shallow roots, even moisture. Heavy soil should be amended with peat moss and rotted compost, which will help acidify the soil. Keep the root zone lightly mulched with leaf mold, screened compost, pine needles or sawdust. Water regularly when the plants are young and during periods of drought, but beware of over-watering or placing blueberries in waterlogged soil, which can kill them.

Timothy Wyant, a commercial blueberry grower in Wheatland, near Leesburg, has grown five early- to late-season varieties of high bush blueberries: Blueray, Bluecrop, Berkeley, Jersey and Darrow. Many of the shrubs are 30 years old and still bearing. "I have always mulched them with sawdust from sawmills, mostly oak, which is quite acidic," he said.

I think of low bush blueberries as occupying the frigid terrain of New England, but Reich, a former researcher for the Department of Agriculture, has seen it growing successfully in the Washington area.

Blueberry bushes must be netted, or the fruit will be taken by birds. At his home in New Paltz, N. Y., Reich grows blueberries in an enclosed pen, ringed with cedar posts that support netting. As the fruits begin to ripen, he places netting on top of the enclosure.

For individual bushes, gardeners can fashion temporary netted frames to cover a blueberry coming into fruit.

### Brambles

Brambles, such as raspberries and blackberries, are inherently lax and twiggy, producing canes from suckers; I wouldn't place them in a prominent part of the yard. Reich, however, has tied the lankier blackberries up posts and pillars, as you might a climbing rose. Everbearing raspberries can be cut to the ground each winter. Other raspberries and blackberries require a different pruning regimen: At the end of each season, remove old canes that have fruited and thin out the new canes to allow the remaining ones elbow room for the following year.

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World stock, there is American black currant (*Ribes americanum*), sharing that pleasantly tart flavor of the European currant. Reich commends another native species, the clove currant (*R. odoratum*). The yellow blossoms carry a heavy scent, and the flavor of the fruit is "both sweet and tart," he said. Unlike other currants, the berry clusters ripen unevenly, "which is good if you want to nibble," Reich said.

### Figs

Once established, fig trees function as attractive, coarse-leaved large shrubs. Fruiting will fall off in shade, but even then the trees are worth growing. In my garden, a stand forms a perfectly scaled transition between a large rose specimen and the base of a red oak tree.

Varieties might need stem protection in their first and second winter, though milder conditions in recent years have produced plants that reach 20 feet tall, particularly in east-facing beds protected from winter winds.

### Juneberries

Juneberry is a name for a large deciduous native shrub known botanically as the amelanchier. Several species and many varieties have been developed, some for ornament and others for fruit, though all look good and are edible. Reich lists 13 varieties in his book and raves about the flavor of Honeywood, Moon Lake and Thiessen. I have a friend who rates highest the berries of a species named *Amelanchier lamarckii*.



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If I had room for only one bramble, it would be the blackberry. Large, productive varieties have been introduced. McConkey likes three thornless varieties: Apache, Arapaho and Schultz. I have grown Kiowa, which is as tasty as it is huge, but it is wickedly thorny.

### Currants

Currants thrive in northern states, but they grow happily in the Washington area if given mulch and afternoon shade. In addition to the black, red, white and pink currants from Old

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### Grapes

The key to success with grapes is to pick the right variety. Concord has its limitations, seedy and foxy as it is, but it is a reliable performer in our difficult climate, as is its white-fruited counterpart, Niagara. Corson trains five vines on the perimeter fence of her vegetable garden. Three are Concord, the other two of an unknown green variety. Three years ago, she went on vacation to Maine and returned to find that deer had eaten all the ripening fruit. The next year, she put netting over them and harvested 120 pounds of grapes.

The University of Arkansas has introduced a number of disease-resistant and seedless table grapes, including Mars, Jupiter, Reliance and Neptune.

If you are looking for an alternative to grapevines, kiwifruit and another species called the hardy kiwifruit offer dense, tropical-looking foliage and nice fruit at season's end, though you will need a male vine to pollinate fruiting female plants.

### Persimmons

Both the native and very different Asian persimmon offer landscape plants that are attractive, glorious in fall leaf color and loaded with fruit in October.

The native tree is upright and narrow. Reich suggested choosing a variety developed for high-quality fruit. He listed, among others, Garretson, with a clear orange flesh; the large fruited Killen; and Szukis. The Asian species is a smaller tree but broader and with dense, glossy green foliage. The fruits are typically larger and include non-astringent varieties. I grow Fuyugaki, with orange-red, tomato-like fruits that set well without cross-pollination.

As with mulberries, persimmons are messy when they fall and shouldn't be placed near driveways, paths or patios.

### Mulberries

Mulberry trees are generally disdained for littering and not being particularly ornamental as shade trees. But the fruits are sweet and loved by humans, other mammals and birds. The native red mulberry is, in maturity, a large tree. The introduced white mulberry is smaller but still a shade tree that reaches 30 feet tall. Many of the named varieties are hybrids of the two, including Illinois Everbearing, which McConkey commends for its flavor. The varieties Weeping and Gerdali Dwarf are far smaller than other hybrids and suited to smaller yards.

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Reich says the best mulberry fruit is that of the black mulberry, which he keeps in a container to bring in during the winter. It is not reliably hardy much below 20 degrees but might be worth trying in a sheltered Washington garden. With a more balanced sweet-tart flavor, it's "perhaps the best-tasting fruit there is," he said.