Favorite Fruits

'Consider the rewards as you begin growing orchard crops: superior flavor and nutrition from organically grown trees in your own back—or front—yard'

He's the apple of my eye . . .
Skin like peaches and cream . . .
Lips like cherry wine . . .

The language of fruit, like fruit itself, is sensual, luscious, almost drunken in its excess. It drips with desire, with sweetness, but sometimes includes a tart crunch, an unexpected bite of flavor.

This complex ripeness of fruit in its natural-grown state comes to us only part of the year, and we crave it. We picture then not the cold uniformity of a grocery store produce aisle at some indeterminate season, but the surprising warmth of fruit snapped right off the tree at the peak of its succulence.

Growing orchard fruits surely ranks as one of the most rewarding of garden experiences, one that spans generations and links us to the ancient past, as well as tying us to the unknowable but hopeful future.

There's a tremendous sense of accomplishment in planting a young fruit tree, watching it grow to bearing size, and then enjoying and preserving the bounteous fruit in its many forms.

Luck, hard work, and patience are requisites of the endeavor, of course, so using orchard fruits in the home garden is a process of learning over many years, a humbling experience that deepens and unfolds oh so gradually.

After all, fruit trees are like children: they need sunshine and fresh air, dry feet, balanced nutrition, and an occasional haircut. Then they'll grow up big and strong.

When we plant fruit trees in the home landscape we get to watch up close the pageant of procreation: the love-making dance between insect and plant, the drama of the elements, growth and decay, life and death in an unwavering and unmerciful annual cycle.

And we get to watch as the infant fruit takes hold, growing ever larger with summer's heat and rain and with tending, as it approaches the moment of harvest, the long, slow climax of summer.

All that sensuality of the fruit ignores the great value of orchard trees in the home landscape. One needn't have acres of open land in order to enjoy the scenic enhancements. No, the most wonderful orchard crops can also add greatly to a modest-sized yard in the form of individual or, at most, paired specimen trees (requirements for pollination vary). Just a few small, carefully situated, faithfully pruned and weeded fruit trees can do two important jobs: provide a bounty of fruit to be "put up" for the winter, and add the drama of massed pink or white blossoms to the home landscape in early spring.

Spring certainly brings out the best in our favorite fruit trees, which produce wands of light, fresh, finely veined blossoms reaching for the sky (or, as cuttings kept in a vase, brightening the living room). But with the most beloved orchard crops, there are also scenes of timeless enjoyment in midsummer as one sits conversing with family and friends beneath the dense, ripening boughs, cool and tranquil together within imaginary summer-houses of shade. And all that after only three or four years!

In fall, modest bursts of color play back and forth across the home landscape, and then in winter, the fine, open profiles of favorite fruit trees continue to delight us when all the supposedly strong and stalwart perennial plants have frozen and wilted into the ground. Snow collects from time to time in the limbs. Birds pass through and perch, but, mostly, the trees wait for spring again.

Apples

If any plant can talk, it's the apple.

"Take me! Take me!" it shouts. "I'm wonderful!"

Why shouldn't the apple brag? It's one of the healthiest foods anywhere, with the power to fight cancer and heart disease, improve memory, and make the lungs work better. Apples are delicious and fun to eat, and they come in hundreds of varieties for many tastes and climates.

Apple trees are among the happiest of trees; not carefree, but stupendously productive and lovely in the garden once established. The addition of two or three apple trees of different types in the home landscape—more if space allows—will provide ample rewards for your time.

With their light fragrance and luminous pink petals, apple trees claim a starring role in the springtime landscape. Plant varieties that best suit your local climate.

There's no comparison between a bland, waxy supermarket apple and one that's ripe off the tree at home. Just one successful crop and you'll never want another store-bought apple.

Caution: Don't plant apple trees unless you're ready to can, dehydrate, ferment, or otherwise process the surplus fruit. It would be a shame to let such bounty go to waste. A young apple tree takes some years to get established before the internal structure can support fruit production. But a healthy apple tree may live for a century and bear fruit heavily for forty or fifty years of that—sometimes a hundred pounds or more a season.

A member of the rose family, the apple is close kin to pears and quinces. It has been cultivated for thousands of years, in western Asia at first, thence to Europe and North America.

Today, breeders are expanding the traditional range of apples to include warmer climates. There are apple trees specially suited to all temperate regions of the United States, with some surviving even at -20° F. And there's a resurgence of interest in planting heirloom varieties with superior taste.

The best approach to growing apple trees, then, is to begin close to home. That's where the United States Department of Agriculture's Cooperative Extension System comes in. With offices in each state, the Extension provides free educational advice and materials for home gardeners and others. The Web resources are excellent but a phone call or visit to a local Ag Extension agent provides the most locally relevant information, including plant suppliers.

Horticultural "tech support" is especially important with apples, almost all of which combine root stock from one kind of plant with the fruiting upper part of another in a graft. Knowing which varieties—which grafts—favor the many mini-climates of the Northwest, the Midwest, the Northeast, and the South requires research and experience.

Then there's the matter of size: dwarf, semi-dwarf, or standard. Each has its growth and fruiting characteristics, its typical lifespan, and its particular place in the culinary world. And there are complex pollination requirements, so consult the experts first and save a lot of time and guesswork.

Or do what I did: ignore all sensible advice, plant what you find close to home and on sale, and hope for the best. My random young trees—a mix of Jonagold and Jonared apples—have responded to the rough mountain weather with bumper crops.

German Pancake

Boiling water
½ to ¾ cup chopped dried apples, apricots, cherries, dates, figs, pears, raisins or dried currants
6 tablespoons butter
6 eggs
1 cup milk
¼ teaspoon salt
1 teaspoon sugar
½ teaspoon vanilla extract
1 cup flour
Lemon juice and powdered sugar or berry jam or jelly, if desired

Pour boiling water over dried fruit to cover. Let stand to soften 5 to 15 minutes; drain. Preheat oven to 400 degrees F (205 degrees C). In preheating oven, melt butter in a 13 x 9-inch baking pan, checking frequently to avoid scorching. In blender, combine eggs, milk, sugar, salt, and vanilla. Blend lightly to mix.

Add flour. Mix well in blender. With a wood spoon or rubber spatula, stir in chopped dried fruit. Pour into baking pan containing melted butter. Bake 20 to 25 minutes until puffy and golden brown. If desired, sprinkle with lemon juice and powdered sugar or serve with berry jam or jelly. Serve immediately. Makes 4 to 6 servings.

Recipe "German Pancake," from How to Dry Food, Revised Edition, by Deana DeLong, copyright ©2006 by Deanna DeLong. Used by permission of Berkley Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

Landscape highlights:

Spring blossoms
Summer and fall harvest.

Edible highlights:

Fresh fruit from the tree
Canned as applesauce, apple butter, spiced apples, or juice
Dehydrated in slices

Where it grows best:

In temperate zones with cold winters
In full sun
In a fertile, well-drained soil.

How to grow it:

With specific local characteristics (see Resources section for Agricultural Extension information)
With other apple varieties for cross-pollination and longer harvest period
With plenty of moisture With moderate pruning for air circulation and height.

Hardiness zones:

North America is divided into eleven climate zones, numbered 1–11, with Zone 1 the coldest and Zone 11 the warmest. Minimum temperatures are noted in 10-degree F increments.

While zones don't tell the whole story of what will grow and thrive, they help in choosing varieties for your locality. See the zone finder on the National Gardening Association's Web site, www.garden.org.

Usually orchard trees need some frost to produce fruit, although frost-free apples are under development. Some apples grow in -30 degrees F, Zone 4.

A well-placed cherry tree becomes the focal point of an edible landscape, providing four seasons of beauty in addition to superb fruit. Photo ©iStockPhoto/ Marie Fields.

Cherry

The cherry tree is garden royalty, a horticultural grand duchess of regal stature and luxuriant garb, dispensing gifts liberally . . . but, like royalty, occasionally withholding her favors.

Among the first orchard trees to blossom in the spring and the first to bear fruit (and bearing younger than most other fruit trees), the cherry deserves a prominent place in the edible landscape. The cherry tree in magnificent bloom has come, over centuries of art history, to represent the visual essence of purity, beauty, and hope. Imagine how much more intense is the springtime experience of a cherry tree in full bloom when it occurs in your own home landscape.

To add to the allure, blossoming time often overlaps with snow, producing moody compositions of turbulent grey skies and snow-covered pink petals.

Beauty persists through an exceptionally long harvest season, ranging from June to August, depending on variety, and then through the red-gold glory days of autumn and into the winter months, when cherry bark gleams with warmth and color against crystalline snow. Soon after that, the flowers come again.

The fruit of the cherry tree is treasured for its voluptuous sweetness and satisfying texture. Cherries have important properties: high levels of anti-inflammatory and pain-killing compounds, potassium, sleep-regulating melatonin, and antioxidants. The fresh fruit is a pleasure to eat, but it also lends itself to canning and dehydration for year-round enjoyment.

Cherry trees don't need much pruning or fertilizer. The lustrous wood glows red and is used for fine furniture, cabinets, and musical instruments. Not a bad use of a fine old tree once its bearing days are over.

Cherry trees have a few big drawbacks. Some kinds of cherries are more tender than others, so plant selection is important. Some are susceptible to insect pests and diseases. And not insignificantly, a season's fruit can quickly be wiped out by hungry birds, so you'll need netting every year if harvest is a prime goal. Heavy rains too close to harvest can ruin the fruit, and fruit may not set at all if blossoms are knocked off by a storm.

Nonetheless, the cherry tree grows well in conditions found widely throughout the United States and remains a garden favorite.

There are three categories of cherry: sweet cherries, sour (or pie) cherries, and hybrid types, sometimes referred to as Duke cherries.

Generally the sweet cherries are the big juicy kinds that grace local fruit stands and make their way into supermarkets. These trees are more tender than the sour cherries, more like peaches in their requirements for mild weather and careful pest control.

Sweet cherry trees are taller and broader and are more difficult to protect from birds in the home landscape unless grown on dwarf or semi-dwarf stock. They need cross-pollination, whereas the sour cherries are generally self-fertile.

The sour cherries can withstand more cold (try -40° F), more bugs, more neglect, and soil that's not as deeply worked or as rich. They aren't really sour but are widely used in cooking, as they are flavorful and juicy and not overly sweet. And some nutrient levels are higher for the sour varieties.

Hybrids have characteristics of both, in varying proportions, and can be advantageous in meeting the challenges of particular locations. Just as with apples, this is a time to do research for local plant sources through your nearest Agricultural Extension office.

Thoughtful placement of cherry trees, particularly the more sensitive sweet cherries, can help the chances of success: a location at the side of a pond or a lake, or on a hillside, can mitigate the effects of a late freeze.

Preserving cherries is a pleasure once you've had your fill of fresh fruit. Canning, drying, or freezing ripe cherries can liven up the winter table at low cost.

Photo courtesy of Northwest Cherry Growers

Savory Cherry Sauce

1 tablespoon butter
2 tablespoons minced shallots
1 ¼ cups canned sweet cherries, drained*
½ cup Pinot Noir
½ cup chicken stock or low-sodium broth
½ teaspoon fresh thyme leaves
1 teaspoon cornstarch dissolved in 1 teaspoon water

Melt butter in a medium saucepan. Add shallots and cook until golden brown, about 5 minutes. Stir in cherries, wine, and broth. Simmer 15 minutes over medium heat. Let cool slightly; then puree in a blender or food processor. Return to pan and add thyme and cornstarch. Whisk constantly over medium-low heat for 10 to 15 minutes or until thickened and reduced to about ¾ cup.

Recipe courtesy of National Cherry Growers & Industries Foundation.

*Canned sweet cherries are made using fresh cherries packed in a hot syrup of 1 ½ cups sugar to 2 cups water, and then sealed in sterile pint or quart jars with a 25-minute boiling water bath.

Landscape highlights:

Spring blossoms
Winter bark interest

Edible highlights:

Fresh fruit from the tree
Canned (pitted) as pie filling or sauce
Dehydrated (pitted) for snacks
Frozen for winter use

Where it grows best:

In a cool or cold climate (to -40 degrees F, Zone 3) <AQ: no colder than zone 3?>
In deeply-worked friable soil that drains well
In full sun

How to grow it:

With some cross-pollination; check variety for requirements
With bird netting to protect fruit (see Bird Netting, page 000)
With planting in fall or early spring
On dwarf root stock for ease of harvest

Bird Netting

Especially delicious fruit crops attract flocks of birds, so many gardeners install medium-weight bird netting over the fruiting trees or bushes before fruit ripens. Methods may include netting alone or on a framework of plastic piping or wood. The re-usable nets are widely available at farm or home improvement stores, or online. Lightweight or fine netting is hard to handle. Some gardeners build movable chicken wire boxes to guard low-growing fruit or nuts.

Crabapple

Surprise! The crabapple is a must-have tree in the edible landscape.

Smaller than most other fruit trees and hardy to sub-Arctic temperatures, the crabapple needs little care yet reliably produces loads of delicious fruit that's packed with vitamin C and pectin, and therefore perfect for making jelly. The jelly is truly "summer in a jar" thanks to its sunny hue, and it makes a treat in midwinter. (Some cooks add crabapple juice to their apple cider in the fall for extra flavor.)

Crabapple trees encourage good pollination for other kinds of apples and should be used for that reason alone. Any late-summer fruit that isn't harvested will stay on the trees for months, providing food for wildlife.

And then there are the flowers in spring, in shades from snow white to magenta, a great addition to the landscape.

I don't know where the crabapple's unfavorable reputation originated. Perhaps it reflects the fact that some varieties are too sour to eat right off the tree, although nearly all crabapples are delicious when cooked.

Crabapple fruit, it is true, has a tartness that may not be to everyone's liking. But then, I'm spoiled by having a generous neighbor with two heavily bearing crabapple trees in her front yard. Neither of us knows what variety they are, but the fruit, when it ripens, turns a beautiful pink-tinged gold. The taste is like candy, a perfect balance of sweet and tart . . . and juicy. From catalog descriptions we have narrowed them down to the popular Callaway crab or possibly a Siberian or native American sweet crabapple.

My neighbor also has two delightful young daughters, and every year at hurricane season—usually the first or second week of September—the three of us spend an hour in the trees picking fruit (nice to know the trees have never been sprayed with toxic chemicals).

Over the next day or so I make jelly and leave a few jars on their doorstep as thanks. I say hurricane season because, living in the mountains of western North Carolina, we often feel severe effects of hurricanes hundreds of miles away. Just as the storm clouds begin to mass and warnings come over the radio in Boone, I remember that the crabapples will be just right and must be saved from damage. I treasure our warm, portentous afternoon forays.

Crabapples come in many varieties. Commonly on offer are Transcendent, Callaway Crab, Dolgo, Kerr, Hyslop, and Young America. Check with supply houses to see what new cultivars are available, and don't be afraid to call for specific information about the fruit characteristics.

The hardy crabapple variety called Rescue grows as far north as Alberta, Canada, where this specimen produces abundant yellow-green fruit. *Photo courtesy of Linda Pierson, Wardlow, Alberta.*

Crabapple Jelly

Use this jelly in yogurt with nuts for breakfast or as a glaze for roasted game or poultry.

Pick a sweet-tart variety of crabapple as it approaches peak ripeness, but include some underripe crabapples for more pectin.

Yield depends on the amount of crabapples picked. Two extra-large mixing bowls of fruit, about 15 to 18 pounds, yields 12 to 16 half-pints.

Rinse the crabapples in batches, leaving plenty of stems. Halve the fruit, place in a heavy enameled pot, and add enough water to cover. Bring to a boil and cook until fruit is soft and the liquid lightly colored, 5 to 10 minutes. Remove from heat and strain through a cheesecloth-lined sieve into a clean bowl. Do not squeeze or press the pulp, as this clouds the jelly. Let the final batches sit overnight so all the juice can drip through.

The next day, wash and scald canning jars, new lids, bands, and utensils, including a wide-mouth funnel. Measure the juice, up to 8 cups per batch. Bring juice to a rapid boil in a large enameled pot for 5 minutes, removing any froth that forms; at the same time prepare a water bath in a separate kettle for sealing the jars.

Add ¾ to 1 cup of sugar for each cup of juice. Dissolve sugar in the boiling juice, and continue to boil until the mixture reaches the jelling point. Test for this by pouring a small quantity of the mixture off the side of a wide cooking spoon; when it slows and forms a sheet rather than individual drops, jelly is ready, usually about 15 minutes.

Pour carefully into jars, leaving ¼ to ½ inch headroom, gently cover with lids and bands, and seal in a hot boiling water bath for 20 minutes.

Crabapple jelly glows pink-orange and brightens a winter day. Thanks to its high pectin content, the jelly is nearly foolproof for beginning cooks. *Photo by Jamie Goodman*

Landscape highlights:

Spring blossoms
Winter wildlife food source

Edible highlights:

Fruit preserved as jelly
Added fresh to apple dishes for flavor

Where it grows best:

In full sun
In a place with cold winters
In moist but well-drained soil

How to grow it:

As a garden focal point for spring blossoms
For harvest after the first frost
With little pruning or pest control needed

Varieties to try:

Crabapples are naturally small, growing from six feet to about thirty feet at most. For best eating try Callaway crab, Dolgo crab, or the Kerr apple-crabapple hybrid.

Dripping with fruit, a well-established peach tree may produce bushels a season. Peaches grow quickly, providing welcome shade within a few years. Credit: Photo by Joanne Firth, courtesy of the California Tree Fruit Agreement

Peaches

Only fools or optimists grow peaches.

The tree is temperamental: it falls prey to a wider variety of bugs and diseases than most fruit trees, and it needs careful monitoring and treatment. It prefers a moderate winter climate without late spring freezes, and light, well-drained loam rather than heavier garden soil. It requires more pruning—and more skillful pruning—than many other orchard fruits; at least one grower has written that the fast-growing peach "lives by the knife." The peach has a short life span of only fifteen or twenty years

And yet . . . there's the beautiful, open, vase-like shape of the tree, like a hand raised in supplication, and sprays of pink blossoms in spring, sometimes with hints of yellow or orange like the fruit itself.

Mmmm, the fruit: when plucked ripe from the tree there's nothing to compare. Like something alive, the peach from an edible landscape is warm to the touch, a little fuzzy. Juicy, filled with its own satisfying syrup. As good as a kiss.

A healthy peach tree of bearing age produces bushels of fruit a year. Peaches are nearly as good in their many cooked, baked, or preserved forms as they are fresh. Pie, cobbler, ice cream, chutney, anything. This fruit's combination of taste and texture is one of life's great pleasures.

Peaches managed for long-distance shipping to grocery stores nationwide can never duplicate that experience, because the secret of a tree-ripened peach is the complex development of natural sugars over time.

There's a hopeful quirkiness to peach trees. Despite their many frailties they can survive and flourish in surprising places, and, in fact, they grow in most of the United States, having migrated over centuries from China through Europe to the colonies. Take the case of my gardening friend Marianne's mysterious "mountain peach." Marianne and her husband live on a windswept mountainside near Boone, North Carolina, at four thousand feet elevation. Winters can be intensely cold, with damaging ice and snow. But there in the front yard stands a perfectly formed peach tree, growing more luscious by the year.

The tree blooms every spring, and most summers Marianne harvests huge quantities of fruit, which she makes into preserves.

"How did you get this thing to grow up here, let alone bear fruit?" I once asked. The answer made me laugh. The tree was a volunteer, probably from a pit thrown onto the compost heap, she said. It gets no special attention and has remained disease free for twenty years now.

"Windswept" may be the clue. A peach tree needs good air circulation, both around and within its limb structure; breezes drive away frost and can also keep the branches and leaves dry and less susceptible to disease.

Similarly, peach trees may do well near a lake or pond that can lessen the likelihood of freeze damage. Planted thus, a peach tree never fails to create landscape drama.

Gran'Pappy's Peach Leather

2 1/2 cups mashed ripe peach pulp
1/2 cup sugar, plus sugar for sprinkling

Combine pulp and sugar in heavy skillet. Cook and stir until thickened. Spread out in thin layer on greased baking sheet; cover with gauze, and put in hot sun to dry for 3 days, bringing it inside at night. When leather pulls away from the pan, it is done. Place on board sprinkled with sugar, and sprinkle sugar on top. Roll out as thin as a spatula, then cut into strips 1 1/8 inches wide. Cut small wafers and roll up. Sprinkle again with sugar, then store in box with tight lid.

Recipe reprinted with permission from Southern Appalachian Mountain Cookin': Authentic Ol' Mountain Family Recipes ©2004, APS, Inc.

Easy to make in volume, this summer treat can provide a nutritious snack right out of the freezer. Photo by Joanne Firth, courtesy of the California Tree Fruit Agreement

Peaches and Cream Pops

Makes 4 Servings

½ cup peeled, chopped peaches
½ cup peeled, pureed peaches
¾ cup vanilla yogurt

Lightly swirl all ingredients together in a small bowl. Spoon into 4 Popsicle molds and insert handle. Freeze for at least 4 hours.

**For extra-sweet pops, add 1 to 2 tablespoons of honey to yogurt before swirling. Recipe courtesy of the California Tree Fruit Agreement.*

Landscape highlights:

Spring blossoms
Summer harvest and shade
Fall leaf color

Edible highlights:

Fresh fruit from the tree
Canned in syrup
Dehydrated as "leather"
Frozen in sections

Where it grows best:

In zones with moderate winter temperatures, some sub-freezing weather but no late freezes In light or sandy soil that drains quickly
On sloping ground to shed frost
With specific local characteristics (see Resources section for Agricultural Extension information)

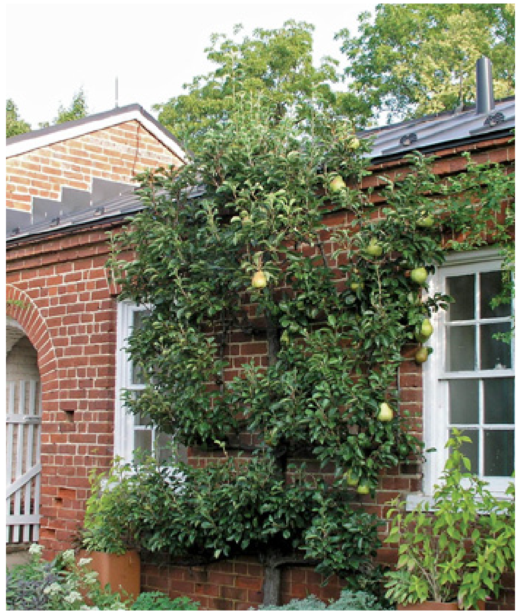
How to grow it:

With early spring planting
With irrigation in dry weather
With weed-free soil around the trunk

Special care for peaches:

To produce the best fruit, peach trees require substantial pruning—as much as thirty percent of the wood—each year after the tree is established. Pruning keeps the tree structure short and open and allows good air circulation, crucial to minimizing disease and to encouraging flower buds at a convenient height. Peaches are susceptible to various pests and diseases. For help choosing organic solutions, see Resources section, and stick to any recommended spraying schedule. Disease-resistant varieties are under development. Fruit thinning may be necessary for full-size fruit and to prevent limbs' breaking.

Pears grow in espalier form near the kitchen garden of Oatlands Historic House and Gardens in Leesburg, Virginia. XXEmailed permission, awaiting signature, Photo by Carla Johnston for Oatlands Historic House and Gardens.



Peaches

First, grow a pear tree.

When I imagine my favorite pear recipe—a weeks-long saga that involves pickling pears in spiced syrup and using them for an olive oil–based torte—that's how I begin.

First, grow a pear tree. It's the ultimate test of patience, for that part alone can take years. That pear trees bear fruit at all is something of a miracle, as pollination may take place over the course of just three or four hours each year and several variables must align precisely to produce viable fruit.

Fortunately, I started my twenty-year love affair with fresh pears by finding two mature pear trees on a vacant lot near my children's elementary school.

The kids and I looked at those pears for years, wondering if we should pick some. Then one evening we packed up a ladder and some paper grocery bags and did it. We waded through high grass and sticker bushes for our reward: hundreds of fat green pears, too hard to eat right away but excellent for ripening at home and for those spiced pickles. The kids liked being encouraged to climb trees higher and higher, to reach for the choicest ones.

Human beings have been eating pears since the Stone Age. Pears figured in the cuisine—and the drinking life—of ancient Greece and Rome, and they became part of the nutritional culture of Western Europe before crossing the Atlantic. In Old World folklore, planting a pear tree was a living good-luck charm, especially to welcome the birth of a daughter.

Pickled, baked, poached, thinly sliced with cheese or in a salad, crushed and made into cider or wine—pears have the feel of antiquity. In long-ago France, particularly, pear culture took hold in the favorable soil and climate, and many pear varieties have lovely French names: Beurre d'Amanlis, Doyenne du Comice, Jargonelle, Bellissime d'Hiver, Conseiller de la Cour, and others.

The grainy texture and nectar-like juice of pears are unmistakable; relatively high levels of vitamin C and potassium and very high fiber content make them a valuable source of nourishment. Dried in slices, pears keep well through the year.

In the edible landscape, pears usher in spring with their delicate white blossoms, which attract insects and make the air come alive for the frenzied pollination period. And because the pear tree has such supple wood, it has long been used for training onto walls in the espalier form; the practice enables gardeners to give the tree extra warmth and shelter in cold climates.

Pears are fussy about cold and fertilizer and mustn't have too much of either. Too-rich soil encourages excess vegetation rather than fruiting, but soil must be deeply structured for the long roots.

When planting pear trees in the edible landscape, keep in mind that each variety is self-fertile; there must be at least two varieties near each other for pollination. And not just any two: different pears can be early, midseason, or late bearing, so it's best to choose pairs that are compatible. Newer dwarf stocks are a boon to the home gardener, as the trees are easier to maintain and require less space.

Pears are highly unusual in needing to be picked before they are ripe. That's because they ripen from the inside out, and by the time the outer layer is ready, the inside has turned to mush. To test for readiness, hold each ripening pear in your cupped palm and turn the hand upward. If the stem separates easily from the tree, it's time.

Pear Chutney

3 pounds pears, peeled and chopped
2 ½ cups vinegar
2 cups brown sugar
1 ½ teaspoons grated ginger
1 teaspoon ground allspice
1 ½ teaspoons salt
1 medium green bell pepper, finely chopped
1 medium onion, finely chopped
½ cup golden raisins
2 teaspoons grated lemon zest
3 tablespoons fresh lemon juice

Place the pears in the vinegar in a non-metal reactive saucepan. Stir in the sugar and spices, and bring to a boil. Add all other ingredients and simmer until thick, about 1 hour.

Pack into 3 sterilized pint canning jars with new, scalded bands and new lids. Leave ½ inch head space. Quickly invert the jars, leaving them upturned for five minutes. When turned right side up, they should seal.

Landscape highlights:

Spring blossoms
Espaliered for year-round interest on wall

Edible highlights:

Fruit ripened off the tree
Pressed for fermentation
Canned whole in spiced syrup
Poached or baked as dessert

Where it grows best:

In full or partial sun, in a cool or cold climate
In soil that's not too rich, to discourage excess leaf growth at the expense of fruit
In generally dry garden conditions to discourage blight, but with occasional watering
On dwarf rootstock for ease of care and harvest

How to grow it:

With other pear varieties for cross-pollination
Without much pruning
With soil weeded around trees to discourage rodents
With excess fruit thinned to prevent limbs' breaking

Cross-pollination tips:

Pears are self-sterile, that is, they cannot become fertilized and bear fruit without another variety nearby, preferably one that blooms and bears fruit around the same time in the season.
The reliable Bartlett pear, the Rousselet of Stuttgart, and Clapp's Favorite all ripen in late August. Seckel pear, Beurre D'Anjou, Orcas, and Bosc all ripen in September. Seckel and Bartlett are a non-fertilizing European pear combination.
Asian pears also cross-pollinate; try Hosui with Chojuro and Shinseiki.
See Resources section for Agricultural Extension information about best local characteristics.

Hiding in the shade, plums ripen gradually to their full sugary goodness in the edible landscape. *Photo courtesy of the California Tree Fruit Agreement.*

Plums

My memories of the plums in my family's backyard are fifty years old but bright as sunshine. It was full summer in Fresno, California, and a band of half-grown boys—they looked so menacing but were probably twelve—streamed into the yard with baseball bats and headed right to a plum tree. I watched from the safety of the house, a scared five- or six-year-old.

We had two plum trees, one of them with immense dark-purple fruits colored red on the inside: juicy and delicious. The other tree was smaller, with small, light-colored plums; they weren't as sweet, and as far as we kids were concerned, that tree was only good for climbing.

Those big boys grabbed handfuls of the overripe fruit that had fallen to the ground, and they hit the lower branches with their bats for more. They tossed a few of the plums into the air and hit them like baseballs. Splat! The skins burst and pulp and juice went flying. The boys laughed hard, grabbed their plum booty, and fled to the middle of our otherwise quiet street to continue their game of plum baseball. The pavement was a mess afterwards.

Ah, how sweet those days of careless excess. If I had those two plum trees today, of course, I'm sure I would be baking, cooking, drying, and canning the fruit to capture some of that summer-flavored goodness for the rest of the year. The encouraging news is there's no reason, with time, that I can't have homegrown plums again. There are already two young trees started in my edible landscape in western North Carolina.

Plums have been called the "most various" kind of fruit tree in America. With two main types of plum—European and Japanese—and many hybrids of each, there's a plum tree for every climate and soil type (so contact your local Agricultural Extension office). A third strain consists of the American native plum species; according to some classification systems, the Damson is a separate plum type.

The European plums, which include the tart Damsons as well as high-sugar prune plums for drying, are popular for eating fresh, cooking, or canning; Japanese plums are known for eating fresh. American natives produce edible fruit that can be made into preserves, and with their lower, shrubby habit, they can add needed screening in the landscape.

In general, plum trees like dry heat. They require some pruning, of course, and if they have proper pollination (in some cases cross-pollination) and fertilizer, they can bear hundreds of pounds of fruit a year over a long harvest. Their beautiful pale pink or white blossoms evenly spaced along twisting branches are a symbol of springtime perfection. Meaty and nutritious, plums lend themselves to all kinds of culinary uses: baked into breads and cakes, roasted with meats, and made into jams, chutneys, wines, cordials, and dried fruit leathers. Prunes are simply dried plums and have a wide range of uses on their own.

Rosewater Plum Compote

5 pounds plums
¼ cup fresh lemon juice
1 pound sugar (fine-grain organic cane sugar)
3 tablespoons rose water

Have a big bowl ready. Pit and chop the plums into small ½-inch pieces. As you chop, place the chopped plums in the bowl and toss with a drizzle of the lemon juice every once in a while. When all the plums have been chopped, gently toss them with any remaining lemon juice and the sugar. Stir in the rose water. If possible, let the mixture sit for twenty minutes or so.

In a large, wide, thick-bottomed pot, bring the plum mixture to a boil over medium heat. Stir regularly, scraping the bottom of the pot to make sure the fruit doesn't burn. Adjust the heat if needed and cook at a lazy boil for about 20 to 25 minutes, skimming off any foam that develops. Be mindful of the texture of the fruit; you don't want to overcook (or over-stir) the fruit to the point that it breaks down and goes to mush.

Remove from heat and spoon the compote into individual jars. Refrigerate until ready to use. It will keep for about a week like this. Makes about eight half-pint jars.

Recipe courtesy of Heidi Swanson / 101cookbooks.com.

Crops can be huge as plum trees come into their bearing years. That's why a good recipe for preserves is worth keeping close at hand.
Photo courtesy of Heidi Swanson, www.101cookbooks.com.

Landscape highlights:

Spring blossoms
Summer harvest

Edible highlights:

Fresh fruit from the tree
Dehydrated as prunes
Canned as jam or compote

Where it grows best:

In zones with warm or hot summers but cold winters (to -30 degrees F, Zone 4, depending on variety) In full or half-day sun
In well-drained soil, not too rich
Spaced at least twenty feet apart

How to grow it:

With only light pruning to allow light and air into framework
With planting in fall and pruning in spring
With fruit thinning to prevent overbearing and damage to trees

Quince blossoms daub the spring landscape with creamy pink blooms. The fruit is tough but is flavorful in preserves and sauces when cooked. Photo by Nan K. Chase.

Quince

On a continuum of the pome fruits—apple, pear, and quince—quince is considered the hardest because it has the highest concentration of "stone cells," which give quinces their especially granular, almost gritty, skin and tough fruit. Quinces may also be the most beautiful of the pome fruits, with twisting branches, a compact shape that needs little care, and supremely attractive creamy-pink blossoms in early spring.

"A quince tree is beautiful in flower, leaf, and fruit, and is an ornament on any lawn," wrote one orchardsman. "Every owner of a fruit garden should have two or three quinces." Some biblical scholars contend that the apple in the Garden of Eden was really a quince. Indeed the quince was familiar throughout Greek mythology and made an appearance in Roman cookbooks—stewed with honey—and in cosmetics (hair dye) and cough medicines of the day.

The quince brings four seasons of enjoyment to the edible landscape and some interesting possibilities in the kitchen. Spring flowers begin the cycle, followed by lush foliage in summer, slowly ripening fruit in fall and through the first frosts, and, finally, winter interest as snow settles onto the tangled limbs.

Topping out at about twenty-four feet, the self-fertile quince can also be pruned to good effect. Some varieties, including the lovely contorted quince, grow considerably lower.

Horticulturalists indicate that the quince grows in exactly the same places the apple grows and so doesn't do well in the very hottest regions of the South and

West. Quinces have the same need as apples for good air circulation around and through the branches, and for adequate drainage. That has certainly been the case in my own yard.

In years when a late frost knocks out the apple blossoms, my small quince bush at the edge of the yard is hard-hit too. But when the apples bud out and set fruit, so does the quince—and that's magical. The rosy-green young fruits look like gourds as they ripen over the long growing season and take on their yellow burnish.

Because of complications in plant nomenclature, be sure to investigate quinces of the genus Cydonia and flowering quinces of the genus Chaenomeles, both of which bear fruit.

Though the quince fruit is tough, it has a rich fragrance and strong, distinctive flavor as compensation. There are many varieties of quince, with fruit of varying degrees of sweetness; few of them can be eaten out of hand but rather are used for cooking: juice, jelly, marmalade, sauces, baked goods, and more.

Some cooks insist on a few slices of quince in apple pies and bits of quince in applesauce. One tantalizing recipe for quince sauce contains cloves, port, honey, white wine, grape juice, and lemon juice, but no added sugar; another calls for pheasant "roasted with quinces and ginger wine."

Consider quince wine, quince leather, candied or crystallized quince, and a loaf-shaped quince paste, called "membrillo" in some parts, which is a favorite dish in Europe, Latin America, and the Middle East, especially when served with white cheese. It was membrillo that I loved to eat in Bogotá, Colombia, during a college semester there. Membrillo melts in the mouth, sweet and grainy.

Membrillo (Quince Paste)

5 pounds quinces, skin left on, quartered and cored
2 1/4 cups water
Juice of 1 lemon
Sugar 1 cinnamon stick
Baking paper, not waxed paper, and sufficient butter or other shortening to coat

Bring quinces, water, and lemon to boil, and then reduce heat. Simmer with the lid on for 45 minutes. Use a hand blender to puree the fruit and water.
Measure the puree and add to a clean pan along with an equal weight of sugar and the cinnamon stick. Gently heat the paste over a low heat, stirring frequently.

After 30 to 45 minutes the paste should be thickening. Keep a closer eye on the paste at this point, stirring continually.

Once the paste has become thick enough to stand a spoon in and is a deep orange color, remove the pan from the heat.

Tip mixture into a shallow baking tray or ovenproof dish lined with greased baking paper. Keep in a warm place (near radiator or in very slow oven) for 12 hours.

Your paste is now ready! Store in foil in an airtight container for up to a year.

Recipe courtesy of A Wee Bit of Cooking: A Scottish Food Blog, http://teach77.wordpress.com/" http://teach77.wordpress.com

Landscape highlights:

Spring blossoms
Winter interest with snow

Edible highlights:

Cooked as paste
Dehydrated as "leather"
Canned as sauce or jelly
Baked into apple recipes
Candied or crystallized

Where it grows best:

In any climate where apples grow, depending on variety (cold winters, warm summers)
In any but very wet soil
In full or half-day sun
With trunk free from weeds or vines

How to grow it:

As a large shrub from four to twenty feet tall
As a disease- and pest-free fruiting plant
Massed as a hedge, or singly as specimens
With light pruning to eliminate crossing branches