

A FRUITY HARVEST

want a mini orchard? all you need is a sunny spot and some patience.

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Do you aspire to be a fruity person? Plucking a nice crunchy apple off your own tree? Whacking homegrown avocados on your toast? Manically squishing every fig in your yard into some kind of jam? Growing your own fruit tree may sound like the most daunting gardening task imaginable, but with a few juicy tips, pretty much anyone can give it a go.

1. Before you get fruity, know your limits. Gardening boffins claim figs and apples are the easiest fruit trees to grow, so beginners might want to start there. Also, try to find a plant that grew up in a similar climate to yours. If you live in Melbourne, Sydney, Adelaide, Hobart or Perth (temperate zones), hit up apples, peaches and nectarines. Live in a tropical zone (North Queensland, Darwin and the top tip of Western Australia)? Say hello to miracle fruit and mangoes. Meanwhile, Brisbanites should go for sub-tropical trees like avocados and lychees.

2. Is your outdoor space teeny? Embrace the dwarf tree. These tiny wonders flourish with the same sized fruit as standard fruit trees – they're just more compact. Thanks to grafting techniques and much botanical wizardry, you can get dwarf citrus (oranges, lemons, limes) and stone fruit (apricots, peaches, nectarines), as well as apple and pear trees.

3. In the normal run of things, a lot of fruit trees require 'cross-pollination', which means they need a different variety of the same fruit tree nearby for them to be able to produce fruit. Basically, they require more space for their buddies. If you're looking to garden on a small scale, check out plants that can grow solo: 'self-fertile' trees (which include certain varieties of peaches, apricots and figs) or hybrids (fruit trees with two or more varieties grafted onto the same root stock).

4. Now it's time to nab that plant. You need to look for three main things on your fruit tree: an impressive and healthy-looking root system; a straight trunk; and branches growing evenly all around the crown of the tree. Spend time finding your perfect fruit buddy, because it's going to be with you a good long while.

5. If your tree friend is potted, you can pretty much plant that little guy any time of year. But a bare-foot or root-balled tree (where the roots are protected and bound with cloth) will prefer to be planted between late autumn to just before they start to flourish in spring. Fruit trees like a good hit of warmth and light, so find a wind-protected patch of sunny goodness to settle them into. You also need to ensure your soil isn't of the soggy variety and has decent drainage – you don't want them getting the tree equivalent of trench foot. It's not a deal breaker if your soil is mushy: some fruit trees (including mangoes and bananas) will endure it. But your best bet is to create a little mound and plant them on that.

6. It's time to get a bit of dirt under the fingernails. Dig a hole the same depth of your little fellow's root ball (that round part of the plant that the root system springs from) or at the soil mark on the stem. Now stab the soil at the base of the hole a few times for better drainage and, if you have shoddy soil, get some compost in there. Next, gently tease out your tree's roots so they're not matted together. After you've done this, spread the roots out, making sure the soil is settling into every nook and cranny. To avoid air pockets, shake the stem up and down a bit.

7. Now sit back and wait. For a couple of years. Sadly, your tree will most likely not bear fruit until it's two to five years old. You just can't rush apples (or limes or figs)! Think of it this way: a little anticipation will just make the fruit all the sweeter. If you're really impatient, try to get a tree that's already two to three years old.

8. Even before it starts bearing fruit, you'll need to lavish a small amount of care on your tree friend. Make sure fallen leaves and other tree debris are removed, as they can harbour tree-eating nasties. Pruning is another fact of life with fruit trees – winter and spring are the best times to get out there with the secateurs.



australian
finger limes

Inside these elongated citrus gems are little balls of goodness flavoured with tangy lime juice. This thorny, rainforest-dwelling tree produces fruit that ranges from a standard green right through to red, yellow, purple and black. It's a hardy fellow that thrives in sun or shade and loves a bit of rainfall. These guys grow up to be relatively giant (up to 10 metres high), so you'll want to pop them in the garden rather than the balcony.



figs

Growing a fig tree isn't just a short-term thing – these guys will stick around for a while, so make sure you put the most into the early days so they're set up for the long haul. They're pretty hardy and just love resting in the sun, but you will need to look out for hungry birds, rats, lizards and, well, just about anything with tastebuds. They're happy to grow in pots, so if you're an apartment dweller, this might be a relationship to last the ages.



peaches

Despite their soft and fuzzy appearance, peach trees are pretty hardy and come in dwarf varieties, so those with only little skerrick of outside space can get into the stone fruit action, too. Each tree provides you with beautiful flowers in spring and juicy, fuzzy baubles of goodness in summer. They will also make you sing "Peaches" by the Presidents of the United States of America every time you look at them, which is a bonus.



pinkabelles

This mini-me bushy bundle of delight produces Pink Lady apples and, unlike other dwarf varieties, is naturally petite – it's not grafted onto dwarf root stock. Pinkabelles can operate solo if need be, but they do enjoy the company of other apple trees (particularly Granny Smith), so if you surround them with friends they will produce more of their pretty-as-a-picture blush-coloured fruit. Just make sure you give them lots of sun.



miracle fruit

Sadly miracle fruit doesn't give you super powers. It will make anything sour you eat taste as sweet as pie, though. The red berries are native to West Africa, so they like warm and humid climates. If you must have this plant and live in a cooler area, they can grow indoors – just make sure you've got a sunny window to pop them next to. You'll also need a fair bit of patience – slow and steady TLC is a winner with this one.



navelinas

This gorgeous, well-rounded Spaniard with a slightly effeminate name tends towards the short side. Though its reddy-orange skin, slightly oval shape and juicy flesh might suck you in, this sweet fella isn't for beginner fruit growers; it's more for those with medium to deeply hued green thumbs. He's worth it, though. Each spring will welcome scented white flowers in anticipation of the sweet, sweet fruit that will follow. ✿