

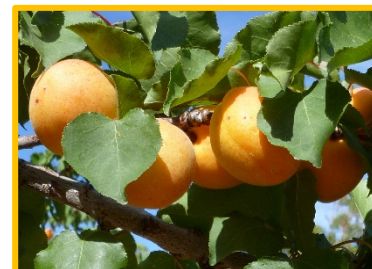


NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

Sweet Success with Apricot Trees (January 20, 2023)

by Susan Franciskovich, Tulare/Kings Counties Master Gardener

Much of the origin of the apricot is lost in time, with China, India, and Armenia all having been thought at one time as the original home of this fruit; however, historical/horticultural studies have proven that China is actually the apricot's country of origin. Apricot trees grow wild in parts of China and were certainly cultivated there by 2000 BC. Traders along the Silk Road brought apricots west, and Alexander the Great introduced them to the Mediterranean area by the fourth century BC. Now, some 4000 years later, apricots can be grown in most of the Western world. California produces about 95% of the apricots sold commercially in the United States. An apricot tree can be produced for up to 25 years and is one of the easiest trees to grow. Why not incorporate a generous and attractive apricot tree into your backyard garden? January and February are the perfect time to plant bare-root fruit trees. They are less expensive and easier to plant than container plants.



Like peaches, plums, and cherries, apricots are considered a "stone fruit" because of the large, hard pit (stone) in the fruit. Botanically speaking, these stone fruits are a type of drupe: thin-skinned fruits with soft fruits around the pit. Apricots are beautiful and sweet smelling when flowering and are one of the most attractive and ornamental fruit trees. Apricots are versatile and are familiar in many forms: they can be dried, made into apricot fruit leather, and preserved into jams and jellies. They can also be canned, frozen, and perhaps, best of all, eaten fresh right off your backyard tree. For extra culinary experimenting, apricots are great broiled, grilled, or poached.

Apricots perform best in climates with dry spring weather. They can be susceptible to late spring frosts. In the Central Valley's hot weather, apricots can exhibit a "pit burn" or softening and browning of the pulp around the pit. (This is a fruit quality problem mainly for commercial growers.) Apricots are mostly self-pollinating. Some set better with cross-pollination, especially in years with cool, wet weather during bloom.

Gardeners can get started by selecting and locating the variety of apricot trees desired. There are a number of main apricot fruiting varieties grown in California. For gardener's convenience, most of the popular varieties (cultivars) are available locally. All of the following cultivars are available at one of Visalia's larger nurseries: Blenheim, Tilton, Moorpark, Patterson, Gold Kist, Tomcot, and Flavor Giant. After tree selection, choose an area in your garden that is sunny and has loamy, well-draining soil. Plant your apricot tree (like all fruit trees) in late winter or early spring while the tree is still dormant. If you are planting more than one tree, space your trees about 10-20 feet apart.

The University of California (UC IPM) reminds us to "plant our fruit trees as soon as possible after bringing them home from the nursery, and do not let them dry out." Roots are very sensitive and should be covered with peat moss or similar material and should be kept in a shady, cool spot until ready to plant. Avoid planting the tree in a low-lying area to prevent any kind of root rot. Soak the roots in cold water 6-12 hours before planting. Carefully spread out the roots, backfilling with soil from the site. The hole should be about 2 feet wide and about 1.5 feet deep. Do not add organic amendments or fertilizers. Water in thoroughly after planting.

Apricots bloom in February and early March. When apricots are grape-sized, thin to one fruit every 4 to 6 inches along the branch to increase the size of the remaining fruit and to maintain the health of the tree. Apricots will ripen about 100-120 days from full bloom, usually in late June to July. Depending on the cultivar, the fruit will turn yellow or develop a red blush as it begins to soften. Apricots are best harvested when they are fully ripe on the tree, starting to soften but still firm. Apricots will be kept for about 1-3 weeks if stored in a cool location.

During the tree's first season, keep the soil moist but not soggy; irrigate about two times per week. For the next few years and beyond, without significant rainfall accumulation, work towards about 30 inches of water over the season. There are no specific fertilizer recommendations for apricots grown in a home orchard. Newly planted apricot trees should not be fertilized in the first year, and fertilizer should not be needed if growth is sufficient. (10-20 inches of growth on new shoots each year is ideal.)

An exceptional feature of apricots is that they are susceptible to the infectious branch killing disease, *Eutrya*. This infection can occur on wounds made from fall through winter in wet weather. The result can be severe gumming of the pruning wound and branch dieback. So, apricots (and cherries, too) should be pruned in July or August so that there are at least six weeks of dry weather following the pruning. Summer pruning also promotes more blossoms the next spring. The first year, cut your apricot branches to

about 24-32 inches above the graft union; they may be cut higher if the tree is to be ornamental, as well as a fruiting tree. If, for some reason, summer pruning doesn't happen, prune in the late dormant season.

The apricot story can't be complete without mentioning the hybrid cousins of the apricot: Plumcots, Pluots, Apriplums, and Apriums. Each of these hybrids contains different ratios of the parent fruits (apricots and plums). As a result of heritage, pluots and pluots have a flavor closer to plums, and plums and apricots have more of an apricot flavor. These hybrids are all intensely sweet.

So remember, to make life a bit sweeter, a delicious and beautiful backyard apricot tree might be the perfect way to go. After all, 4000 years of worldwide success cannot be overlooked.

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