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### **Fruit trees 2015**

The trend to “grow your own” continues to gain in popularity, and in addition to vegetables and herbs, more and more gardeners are beginning to try their hand at growing fruit. Small fruit is much easier to grow and fit in, but fruit trees are being planted in many gardens. Knowing something about the various fruit trees and what your expectations are, will make the decision easier.

Before you buy a tree or two, consider the site. Good drainage is critical, and you need at least 6-8 hours of sunlight a day. Water will be needed, so access to water is important. Then think of air drainage—if you plant fruit trees in a low spot in the yard, that would be a frost pocket, and late frosts can take a fruit crop. Planting on a slope or elevated area improves the air flow and helps with frost protection. Weeds and grass steal light, water and nutrients from your trees.

The top four fruit trees that people know are apples, peaches, plums and pears. The most popular is the peach, which is also the hardest to grow for us in Arkansas. Peach trees have very showy blossoms in the spring and are self-fruitful—meaning you only need one peach tree in order to have fruit. Production is usually increased with more than one variety planted. Peaches suffer from quite a few insect and disease problems. Brown rot is a terrible disease that attacks the fruit within days or weeks of harvest, particularly when we get rain near the harvest period. A dry summer is actually beneficial to peach growers since they maintain the water needed for growth, and the fruit itself can stay dry. Brown rot is not the only disease problem and then there are insects to worry about including plum curculio, peach tree borers and more. All of these problems are curable, but require a pretty thorough spray program, which most home gardeners are not willing to do.

Apples and pears are much more forgiving, especially if you are willing to eat a fruit that is not 100% blemish free. If you are growing fruit for home consumption, you can peel way a brown spot or two. When choosing varieties, look for smaller varieties that can fit into a yard, and something that is fire blight resistant. Fire blight is a bacterial disease. There are sprays that can help to prevent it, but they aren't fool-proof. Resistant varieties are available for many problems, and while resistance doesn't mean you will never have a disease or insect, they definitely help. The two most disease resistant varieties of apples for Arkansas are William's Pride and Enterprise. For pears try Harrow Delight, Maxine, Kiefer, Magness and Moonglow.

A complete list of fruit varieties recommended for Arkansas are found on our website at:

<http://www.uaex.edu/publications/PDF/FSA-6129.pdf>

If you want to branch out and try some less common fruit trees that don't require spray programs, consider figs, pawpaw, persimmons and jujube trees.

Fig trees should not be planted until early spring, since the past two colder than normal winters did some damage on many of the fig trees in the state. Figs are self-fruitful and will bear fruit on new growth. Plant them in a more protected spot where they still get at least 6-8 hours of sunlight—a sunny area near your house is good, but be aware that figs can produce a lot of fruit. If you don't harvest regularly the fruits can split and attract wasps, bees and flies so keep them away from entryways or patio areas. Prior to 1984 we considered fig trees more large bushes than trees, because of winter weather pruning them back hard. Then the milder winters set in, and we have seen huge fig trees being grown from as far north as Ft. Smith through southern Arkansas. Northern counties can still grow them, but they typically freeze back annually. Brown Turkey (also called Texas Everbearing) and Celeste are the most common varieties available, but there are many more you can try. Nero, Blanche (also called White Russian) and Conardia are a few others.

Pawpaws are a native tree with a very unusual fruit. They have been gaining in popularity. They have large, almost tropical looking leaves with a maroon bloom. Pollinating pawpaw flowers can be a challenge. Although the flowers contain both male and female parts, the female part matures before the pollen is ready in each bloom. They therefore need two different trees to get pollination and bees show no interest in pawpaw flowers. Flies and beetles are the pollinators, or you can hand pollinate, using a small, soft brush to transfer pollen to the stigma. The resulting fruit can be quite large. Pawpaw fruit ripens between mid-August and into October, depending on the weather. When ripe, it is soft and yields easily to a gentle squeeze. The skin of the green fruit usually lightens in color as it ripens and often develops blackish splotches which do not affect the flavor. The yellow flesh is custard like often described as a custard banana. Pawpaws don't last long once they are picked, so they will never be commercially available, since they wouldn't last long enough to ship. If you can get to them before the squirrels and raccoons, eat them within two to three days. The trees tend to be more upright in growth habit and can get 12-20 feet tall.

Although our native persimmon does produce edible fruit—provide you eat them after a frost, they are not the showiest tree for the home landscape. A better choice would be one of the oriental persimmons. Some varieties are self-fruitful and others require two varieties for pollination. Oriental persimmons fruit ripens from late August until early December, depending on the variety and weather conditions. *Fuyu-Gaki persimmon* is the most widely planted cultivar in the world. When fully ripe, this fruit turns a crimson red with a blue blush. It is also self-fruitful. Other self-fruitful varieties include Gionbo with very large (4-5") orange conical, astringent fruits, Great Wall, and Matsumoto. Most oriental persimmon trees grow about 15 feet tall and wide. They are disease and insect free for the most part, requiring a little thinning in the spring, and water and fertilization.

Probably the least known, but easily grown home fruit is the jujube or Arkansas date - *Ziziphus jujube*. Native to China, the jujube is a small, deciduous tree, growing to 25- 35 feet tall. The tree does have some thorns on the branches, but overall it has a graceful, drooping growth habit with branches growing in a zig-zag pattern. The greenish-white flowers are small but fragrant, and produced in large numbers from late spring into early summer. Most jujube cultivars are self-fruitful but will produce better with two trees. The fruits can vary from round to elongate and from cherry-size to plum-size depending on the cultivar. They have thin, edible skin surrounding whitish flesh similar to a date and are a mahogany color when ripe. It has one stone inside which contains two seeds. When fully ripe, the fruit begins to soften and wrinkle. Jujube fruit are edible either fresh, dried or preserved in sugar or honey syrups. The trees are extremely drought tolerant and have no pest problems. They are also winter hardy statewide, and rarely suffer from any late frost damage, since they bloom later in the season.

If you want to try your hand at growing fruit trees, do your homework. Make sure you have ample sunlight and space—they are trees after all. Fruit trees other than figs, could be planted in the fall, but often the best variety availability will be in late winter.

Start small. It is easier to maintain a few trees well, than have a mess of overgrown trees that are not productive. Also be patient, most fruit trees can take up to 3-8 years to begin full production. The type of fruit tree, the age of the fruit trees you buy, and their vigor can determine production. Dwarf trees come into production sooner than standard, large trees. Some gardeners are choosing to espalier their fruit trees to use as an ornamental edible or living fence. This requires more work to keep them in that form, but the results can be impressive. And look at new options. Many breeders are working on fruit tree varieties that can be grown in containers or small spaces. Columnar apples are one example.

