



**Swan River Gardens**

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## *Fruit Tree Basics*

At Swan River Gardens we think like to think that every yard is improved by the addition of a fruit tree or two. While we know not all homeowners want a full orchard to tend, nearly everyone can find time for and get great satisfaction out of adding a fruit bearing tree to their property. Here are some simple tips to get you started.

### **Location! Location! Location!**

The spot where you chose to plant is important. Fruit trees need full sun, at least 6 hours a day, preferably more. The majority of fruit trees can be spaced as little as ten feet apart and up to one hundred feet from each other. Fruit is as much as 75% water so a location where you can provide supplemental water is important too. We do not get enough natural rainfall to support fruit trees here.

Local knowledge makes a difference. Swan River Garden's plant buyers take time to make sure the fruit varieties they offer for sale are able not only to survive here but produce a bountiful harvest. Here in the Flathead Valley we can grow sweet cherries down on Flathead Lake but not down at Swan Lake. Out of state plant buyers simply do not understand that type of local knowledge. Fruit trees from a wide range of hardiness zones are sold here so it is important to plant types that are good for the climate where you specifically live. The Swan River Gardens experts have grown fruit here for many years!

### **The Sex Life of Fruit Trees**

(Caution: G Rated material ahead!)

Fruit trees vary among types in regard to their needs for pollination. A fruit tree listed as 'self-fertile' does not need another tree to produce fruit. Trees that need cross pollinators are marked as such and at Swan River Gardens we always offer the appropriate choice. These are some general guidelines: Apple trees always need another type of tree for cross-pollinating. A Macintosh needs another variety such as a Honeycrisp to produce apples. You cannot use two Macintosh; cross pollinating means another variety entirely. At Swan River Gardens, we mark our apple trees with color coded tags to make this easy for you. A blue tagged apple tree pollinates another blue tagged apple tree; a red tag matches a red tag and so on.

Pear trees always need another tree for a pollinator. Since so few pear varieties grow in Montana, Swan River Gardens makes sure the all the varieties we offer work well together.

Some Plum trees are self-fertile and can be grown alone and some need cross pollinating. We make sure to note each variety's needs on its tag and offer trees that work well together.

Pie Cherries are self-fertile and one tree can be a great addition to a small yard. Sweet Cherries vary for pollinating and hardiness. Some need another tree to pollinate while some do not. Swan River Gardens identifies each variety's pollinating needs on its tag.

Apricots can be both self-fertile or require a pollinator. Only a handful of varieties will grow here but the ones that do thrive and produce huge harvests.

Peaches are really only appropriate for the gentler climates along Flathead Lake. While it is fun to try and stretch hardiness zones, long lived choices such as fruit trees are best when planted for the long haul. We often refer to them as 'investments of time' and like any investment deserve sound choices.

## **Organic or Not?**

One of the best things about growing your own fruit is how relatively easy it is to stay completely organic and eliminate chemicals from at least one thing in your diet. Part of the reason for this benefit has to do with the fact that many pests and diseases that plague fruit elsewhere simply do not exist in Montana. The few that do can be controlled by a combination of non-toxic applications and good hygiene.

If you prefer no applications, and we do recommend this unless you have problems, keeping your tree in good health can go a long ways towards keeping problems to a minimum. A tree that is correctly pruned, watered well and fertilized lightly each season is much less apt to be attractive to pests and disease. Good hygiene means discarding of fallen fruit and leaves promptly and keeping the grass under a fruit tree mowed. Most of the critters that cause damage happily thrive in debris on the ground under a fruit tree.

The non-toxic choice for pest control is light horticultural oil. This differs from regular dormant oil in that it is made from paraffinic oil rather than petroleum oil. For disease control, we recommend Lime/Sulfur spray. Swan River Garden's experts can guide you in the choice and application of these products. Timing is critical and will affect your success using organic products.

## **A Good Start**

While homeowners who wish to grow an orchard's worth of fruit may need lots of assistance from the Swan River Gardens experts, those of you who want only a tree or two can benefit from a quick chat with us too. This handout should get you started but be sure to ask us whatever else you need anytime. We think everyone should grow their own fruit at least once in their lifetime and we stand by ready to help!