

Peaches: An Excellent Fruit for Southern New England

Those who have had the privilege of eating a tree-ripened peach know that there are few gastronomic experiences to equal it. Peaches that are available in the local grocery stores will never achieve a high level of quality because they are harvested early, extremely firm, and somewhat immature, making it impossible for them to achieve a high level of quality. Most areas in southern New England have weather suitable for growing peaches. In fact, the quality of New England-grown peaches can rival that grown in almost any other part of this country. Low temperature during the winter is the primary factor limiting production. Peach flower buds will survive at temperatures down to about -12°F. Most flower bud will be killed if temperature drops below -17°F for more than 6 hours. Tree injury and possibly death may occur if temperatures drop to -20°F or below.

Soil and Location

Peaches can be grown on a wide range of soil types but they prefer a well drained sandy loam that retains adequate moisture. Root rot diseases may become a problem if the soil is heavy and does not drain well. Planting in low spots should be avoided because these tend to be the coldest areas during the winter.

Soil Preparation and Planting

Peaches should be planted in well-worked soil having an adequate supply of nutrients and with a pH of 6.0 to 6.5. A soil test prior to planting is a good investment (<http://www.umass.edu/soiltest/>). Deficiencies should be taken care of before planting. Increasing the soil pH requires time after the addition of lime, and some nutrients move so slowly in the soil that incorporation before planting is the only practical way to remedy a nutrient deficiency problem.

Variety Selection

Unlike most fruit trees, peaches do not require two varieties for adequate pollination. However, peaches usually ripen over a 7 to 10 day period. If you select 3 varieties that ripen about 10 days apart, you will be able to harvest peaches over a 4 week period. In general, early ripening peaches are small and have lower quality. Selection of mid-to-late season peaches may result in higher quality fruit. While there are many new and excellent varieties available to choose from, I suggest that one variety that you select should be 'Red Haven'. It is the most popular, and one of the most reliable varieties grown in Massachusetts, and it ripens in early August. Select a later maturing variety such as 'Glohaven'. White-fleshed peaches are becoming popular and they have very high quality. Consider trying one of these.

Planting

Trees should be planted as early in the spring as the soil can be worked without causing compaction. Holes should be large enough to accommodate the entire root system, and deep and wide enough so that roots can rest on the bottom. Allow at least 10 feet between trees. Plant trees so that the largest root is pointing toward the prevailing winds and tilt the tree slightly in that direction. Soil amendments such as compost, composted manure or top soil may be added judiciously. Chemical fertilizers should not be put in the planting hole since research has shown that it is not beneficial when added at this time and, frequently, it retards root

development. The graft union should be 3 to 4 inches above the soil line after planting. When the soil settles it will then be about 2 inches above the soil.

Tree quality from the nursery varies, so specific pruning recommendations are difficult. In general, trees should be headed back to 36 to 40 inches in height. Three to four well-spaced lateral branches should be retained and others removed. Branches that form a sharp angle with the central leader should be removed, even if they are large. They will always be weak branches that will undoubtedly break in the future under the weight of maturing fruit.

Care the First Year

If given the proper care peach trees will grow vigorously during the first year. Weed control is essential. Hand weeding and hoeing are appropriate. If trees are planted in the lawn, be certain to remove all turf with 2 feet of the trunk. Peaches also require a substantial amount of moisture, especially if they are grown in sandy soil. Weekly watering is appropriate. I strongly recommend providing a 4 foot wide circle of mulch around each young trees. Weed control will be achieved and moisture retention can be helped. A handful of a complete fertilizer such as 10-10-10 can be sprinkled around in a 1.5 foot band around the tree a month after planting when the soil has firmed. Avoid placing fertilizer too close to the trunk of the tree.

Tree Training

Peach trees are generally grown as an open center tree. This is done by initially selecting and allowing four well spaced limbs to grow. Other limbs including the central leader are removed.

Pruning

Pruning of peaches is more important than for any tree fruit. They are pruned more severely than any other fruit tree under cultivation for several reasons. Pruning increases growth and flower bud formation for the following year. Peaches usually set an excessive number of fruit. Pruning helps reduce crop load, improve fruit size and reduce limb breakage and tree damage due to excessive crop load. Weak drooping branches and upright shoots are removed. As much as one-third of the fruit wood is removed each year. Where very heavy pruning is warranted, the ends of shoots that grew the previous year may be shortened. Pruning is generally done in the spring, just before flowers open. If flowers were killed during the winter due to cold temperature, damage can be assessed, and more wood and flowers can be left to compensate for that lost during the winter.

Fertilizing

Peach trees can be fertilized with a complete fertilizer such as 10-10-10. Application should be made in the spring before bloom and the amount should not exceed 5 pounds equivalent on a mature tree and not less than 0.5 pounds under a young trees. Spread the 10-10-10 uniformly within the drip line of the tree.

Mulch and Water

Grass and other competing vegetation reduces growth of peach trees and reduces fruit size. We recommend applying some type of mulch, such as hay or straw early in the season. This should be renewed each year. Frequently, mulch is pulled back from the tree in late summer to prevent the buildup of mice and to hasten hardening off. This is then reapplied the following spring. Supplemental water may be required during the summer, especially during dry periods like we are experiencing this year. Adequate water is critical during the two weeks prior to harvest, since this is the time that peaches increase in size most rapidly.

Hand Thinning

Peaches generally require hand thinning each year. This is an activity that should not be neglected because it results in the largest peaches at harvest, improves taste and fruit quality, and reduces the chances of limb breakage due to excessive crop load. Thinning should be

completed early, before fruit are one inch in diameter. Fruit should be spaced no less than 6 to 8 inches apart.

Insects, Diseases and Other Pests

Brown rot is the most destructive pest on peaches. While it may damage flowers at bloom, it is more destructive at harvest where it can result in significant fruit loss. Fungicide applications at bloom and petal fall can reduce inoculum. Green fruit are not susceptible to brown rot, so further fungicide application should be delayed until a week or two before harvest when fruit color changes from green to yellow or yellow/orange.

Peaches are damaged by several insects including: tarnish plant bug, plum curculio, oriental fruit moth, and stink bugs. While these pests can cause fruit damage, acceptable quality peaches can be grown without insecticide application. Peach tree borer damage is becoming increasingly common and they can kill trees. The best control method for home gardeners is to inspect the base of the tree in late May to June from a few inches above to 6 inches below the soil line and look for a holes containing small creamy white larvae with brown heads. Use a pocket knife to surgically remove and kill the larvae.

Birds and squirrels can cause extensive damage on peaches as they begin to ripen. Bird damage can be reduced by the use of scare eye balloons or covering trees with netting. Squirrels pose a formidable problem, and I am not aware of a good method of control for this pest.

Harvest

Peaches generally ripen over a 7 to 10 day period. During this period of time fruit increase in size rapidly, soften, and the ground color changes to yellow orange. Usually 2 or 3 harvests will be necessary. Flavor does not improve after peaches are harvested. Therefore, it is best to wait until fruit soften to the touch before harvesting.

Why don't you plant an early, mid-season, and late variety of peach so that you can enjoy fruit at its finest from mid-July into early September?

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