



Contemplating a Backyard Orchard? Better to think ahead!

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It was about this time a few years ago that my husband first mentioned his burning desire to plant an orchard in our backyard. My first thought was, you want to do what?? We had just moved into our house and were barely unpacked, let alone ready to tackle a major backyard project. I say major because he wanted to plant not just a few trees, more like twenty or thirty. So my planning instincts kicked in and we started to research.

There are so many factors that one needs to consider prior to planting a home orchard. Site selection is foremost on that list and not just where in the backyard are we going to put it; what is the soil type and drainage, is there too much wind and not enough sun and is there enough space for the plants to mature and grow were just a few of the questions we needed to answer.

And then there is our local climate. Here in the foothills of El Dorado County, we are blessed with so many variations in climate, including microclimates, where the temperature can vary by several degrees within a few feet! Not the greatest spot to grow citrus (though it can be done) and the best species that grow here all require between 200 and 2000 chill hours in the winter in order to break dormancy and enter springtime with a productive bud set.

All plants need water! Our irrigation system needed a new layout to provide the appropriate deep water delivery fruit and nut plants need to thrive. Protecting our orchard from the locals is also a priority; deer, rodents, rabbits and squirrels are most common where we live but elsewhere in El Dorado County there are hungry birds, opossums, raccoons, porcupines and bears that would love to nibble on fruiting trees and vines.

We happily set to our next task of selecting our trees. Sweet cherry and pistachio were on our list, both varieties that usually need a pollinizer plant since they cannot produce fruit from their own pollen (self-sterile or self-unfruitful plants). Add the pollinizers to our list! Some varieties were too tall, others too short but we managed to compose a list of thirty trees that included persimmon, pomegranate, apple, cherry, walnut, pistachio and fig.

A year after our planning begun, we had the site mapped out with twine and flags and our bareroot trees ordered (now is a great time to order those, by the way). The pre-planting process took several months and two rentals of equipment, including a jackhammer and a gasoline-powered, two-person auger, and a twenty pound javelin-shaped metal rod to enable my husband to dig sufficient holes for our thirty trees. My pregnancy thankfully and conveniently relegated me to the position of supervisor! Then when our trees arrived it took an entire day to plant; each plant was appropriately pruned and each hole needed proper placement of the young plant and filling and mounding of the natural soil mixed with a soil amendment. Once the irrigation hoses were in place, it was done! All we had to do was wait.

Of course I filled the time doing more research and filling our orchard binder with information about first year care, pruning and training, fertilization, pests and disease, fruit thinning and harvesting, all carefully catalogued by variety. There was much more to do the following year! The first year in a fruit or nut tree's life is very important as it establishes its root system and develops its architecture, both of which are very important to fruitful production (pun intended). Stay tuned for more about our orchard's first year. In the meantime, visit the UC Master Gardener Programs' "The California Backyard Orchard" page at <http://homeorchard.ucdavis.edu/> to find details about planning, planting and maintaining a home orchard. From my experience, it is a project well worth doing, and well worth planning ahead!

Saturday, November 10th, Master Gardeners present a class on "Raised Beds". The class starts at 9 a.m. and is held in the Government Center Hearing Room, Building C, 2850 Fairlane Court, Placerville. There is no charge for the class.

Master Gardeners are available to answer home gardening questions Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m. to noon, by calling (530) 621-5512. Walk-ins are welcome. The office is located at 311 Fair Lane in Placerville. For more information about our public education classes and activities, go to our Master Gardener website at http://ucanr.edu/sites/EDC_Master_Gardeners/. Sign up to receive our online notices and e-newsletter at <http://ucanr.edu/mgenews/>. You can also find us on Facebook.

Do you have plant containers to recycle? Master Gardeners will gladly take them at the Master Gardener Office. Call before dropping them off and thank you for the donation.