

Starting a Backyard Orchard

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A couple of months after we finished planting our backyard orchard I remember dragging a plastic Adirondack chair up the hill and, situating the chair right in the middle of it, I surveyed our creation. At first my imagination kicked in and I saw images of taller, greener trees laden with fruit and baskets overflowing with fruit on the ground below. How great it will be to sit here and enjoy the view with a juicy pomegranate in hand! Shaking my head, I refocused and there before me stood nearly thirty young trees interspersed throughout the brown clay soil in a neat patchwork pattern. “I am looking at a forlorn collection of twigs stuck in the mud!” I thought to myself. “How are we going to get any fruit at all?” Luckily, we had a strategy planned to coax and coach our young friends to adequately establish themselves in their new home.

First, keep ground cover cleared within three feet of every trunk to eliminate the competition for water and nutrients.

Second, when six to eight inches of new growth appeared, apply one or two applications of fertilizer (see website below for fertilizer types and amounts) six inches out from each trunk and water in right away.

Third, address pest control, like vertebrate pest control to prevent severe damage from gophers, rabbits, voles and deer. Thankfully we planned enough ahead to embed a wire cage around the root systems and low trunks of our fig trees (one of a gopher’s favorite type of roots to munch). The best fencing to keep deer away from foliage and fruit is a seven foot high woven-wire fence; you can use repellents, but these need to be reapplied after it rains, a watering or after several days of exposure. The smaller pests, like moles and ground squirrels, fortunately seem to shy away from our prey-driven Siberian Husky dog, though there are ways to eradicate each (see website). Birds were not a huge issue in our orchard that year, though there was no fruit yet to tempt them! In the spirit of planning ahead, screening or netting materials tied around the tree trunk is really the only dependable solution to keeping the birds away.

Fourth, protect tree trunks from sun damage with a second painting in the summer if the canopy is not sufficient to protect the trunk from afternoon sun.

Fifth, prune young trees in summer to promote desired structure. Pruning in the dormant season serves to continue shaping the architecture and manage young fruiting wood.

Finally, make sure the trees are watered properly. They need to be irrigated every two weeks during warm weather and each water application should thoroughly saturate the soil throughout the root zone. Our orchard irrigation system is on a timed drip system that can be easily adjusted. The spouts are located at the edge of each tree’s canopy and every year should be adjusted as the tree grows; this placement ensures the delivery of

water to the tree's root system and not close to the trunk encouraging detrimental mold and fungus formation.

If you have ever studied ecology, you will know that, in their own timeframe, trees are perhaps the most resilient, competitive and opportunistic creatures in nature. In other words, I should not have worried about our little saplings! Along with some tender attention in certain areas, they did just fine on their own that first year. Our second summer in the orchard has come and gone, and in addition to trees that have doubled in size, and even produced a few juicy pomegranates, three stone benches in a gravel seating area have replaced the Adirondack chair, and a thyme-covered path leads through the arbor covered with James Galway climbing roses to the most peaceful and beautiful place in our backyard.

For more tips on how you can create your own backyard orchard, visit <http://homeorchard.ucdavis.edu/>. Enjoy the view!

Learn more about starting your own backyard orchard at the Master Gardener class on "Selecting and Planting Fruit Trees" this Saturday, December 1. 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](tel:5306215512). 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.