



Peaches and Nectarines

Many fruits and vegetables ripen during the mid to late summer months but peaches and nectarines are some of the more luscious selections. Growing peaches and nectarines in the home landscape is not as difficult as one might expect. Choosing a suitable variety, proper planting, good cultural practices, and yearly pruning will pretty much guarantee bushels of mouthwatering fruit. Both peaches and nectarines, which are just fuzz-less peaches, can be eaten fresh, used for baking, made into jams and other types of preserves, canned, or frozen. They provide appreciable amounts of potassium and fiber plus vitamins A and C.

Peaches have been cultivated for thousands of years in parts of Asia and feature prominently in Asian traditions, folklore and art. They were first brought to Europe and later they journeyed to the New World along with Spanish explorers. Commercial production in the United States began in the nineteenth century and large scale peach production occurs mainly in California, South Carolina and Georgia although a few other states have sizeable orchards.

Choosing Peach and Nectarine Varieties

Here in the northeast, peaches and nectarines are limited geographically by winter temperatures. Many flower buds can be killed if temperatures drop below minus 10 degrees F with whole trees succumbing at minus 20 degrees F or lower. It is of utmost importance, therefore, to select varieties hardy to this area. The flip side of this is that these stone fruits do require a certain number of chilling hours for the plants to come out of dormancy. This is not a concern in the northeast but rather a trait more southern gardeners need to select.

There are hundreds of different cultivars of peaches and nectarines but they fall into two categories, the freestones and the clingstones. Almost all named cultivars for backyard fruit production are freestones which mean the flesh readily separates from the pit. Clingstone varieties are predominately used for commercial production. The flesh may be the more traditional yellow or a sweeter, juicier but less peachy flavored white.

Peach varieties suggested for this area include 'Reliance', 'Red Haven' and 'Harbinger'. 'Curlfree' is resistance to peach leaf curl. 'Saturn' or 'Flat Wonderful' are very sweet, white-fleshed peaches that are flattened or donut shaped. For limited spaces, there is the columnar cultivar, 'Crimson Rocket', which can be kept at about six feet in width.

Genetic dwarf peach trees can be grown in a large container. These will not overwinter outside in most areas but can be stored in an unheated garage or other sheltered area. Named varieties include 'Honey Babe' and 'Bonanza'. Although they reach only 4 to 6 feet in height, they still produce full size fruit. Because of their small size, maintenance is quicker and easier. Mericrest is a hardy nectarine developed at the University of New Hampshire. See below for a more extensive listing of varieties suited to Connecticut.

Planting and Maintenance

For optimum growth and yield, peaches require a deep, well-drained soil enriched with organic matter. Ninety percent of their roots are in the top 18 inches of soil so it makes sense to prepare the planting hole well. A soil pH of 6.0 to 6.5 is preferred. If you are planning to add peaches or nectarines to your landscape, the site can be prepared in advance. Have your soil tested, add limestone, organic matter and nutrients if necessary, working any

amendments about 6 to 8 inches deep in a 4-foot by 4-foot planting area for each tree. Do not add more fertilizer to the planting hole.

An ideal location for peaches would be in full sun on a north facing slope. This exposure warms slower in the spring than a south facing slope and blooming will be delayed slightly. This is important as trees that bloom too early will be more likely to suffer frost damage. If no slopes are available, at least avoid planting trees in low lying areas or other frost pockets.

Generally nursery stock is sold as one year old trees that are 3 to 4 feet in height. Both peaches and nectarines are almost all self- fruitful so only one tree is necessary. Blocks of two or more different cultivars though will extend the production season. Trees are generally planted 15 to 25 feet apart depending on their size at maturity. Standard peach trees reach 15 to 20 feet in height with dwarfs reaching about half that size. Expect 30 to 60 pounds of fruit from a mature, well-pruned dwarf and 60 to 100 pounds from a standard sized tree.

Once planted trees are generally fertilized once each spring with the amount of fertilizer dependent on the diameter of the tree's canopy and on the length of the new growth. In general, mature peach and nectarine trees should be producing 12 to 18 inches of new growth each year. Mulching around the trees will keep the weeds from competing for water and nutrients and retain moisture.

Pruning Peaches and Nectarines

Peaches and nectarines do need a fair amount of pruning. This is necessary to maintain a size that is easily manageable, and to ensure sunlight reaches the ripening fruit in the center of the tree. Peaches are only produced on last year's growth so no more than 50% of old wood should be removed. Peach and other fruit trees should be pruned when dormant (without leaves). If fruit trees are pruned during the growing period then fruit may be slower to ripen (as the tree's carbohydrate production has been lessened) or newly exposed fruit may get sunburned.

After planting a year-old seedling, cut it back to about 30 inches and remove all side branches to form a whip.

Although this sounds drastic, this technique produces nice, open bowl shaped trees. For the next two or three years remove any broken, diseased, dead or particularly low-hanging limbs. Remove any upright vigorous shoots growing towards the inside of the tree, keeping in mind that fruit is only produced on horizontally growing branches. Shoots will have two types of buds: small, pointed buds are vegetative growth and large, rounded, hairy buds are flower (and subsequently fruit) buds. 12-24" shoots will have the best proportion of leaf and fruit buds.

Pruning goals for years 6-10 are to maintain a height between 7-9 feet and to ensure productive wood. Remove all vertical sprouts. Horizontal fruiting shoots will form further out on branches but still may be pruned to keep the tree within bounds. Heading back, the cutting away of a portion of the terminal growth of a branch or shoot, usually to control the size of the tree or shrub, may stimulate new growth in the tree center.

When pruning, try to visualize an open bowl shape often with three main framework branches. Once you have established the form of the tree by the third year annual pruning consists of shortening and removing excess new wood and removing older branches as they begin to block the sun from the center of the tree. Diseased, cankered, dead and crossing branches should also be removed. Vertical waterspouts may be removed at any time.

The fruit itself also needs to be thinned as it starts to develop. Leave approximately one fruit for every 50 leaves or about 6 inches between individual peaches.

Harvest and Storage

As peaches and nectarines ripen their base skin color changes from a greenish coloration to a deeper yellow, orangey color but because of the reddish blush, this change is not always evident. Ripening fruit will look fuller, develop a peachy aroma and feel softer to the touch. Several pickings may be required to enjoy the fully sun ripened, sweet harvest. Once the fruit has fully ripened it is best used promptly as it is perishable. Peaches and nectarines can be stored in the refrigerator for a week or two.

Insect and Disease Problems

Common insect problems include the notorious peach tree borer and the plum curculio. Peach leaf curl and brown rot seem to be the major diseases in this area. Explore some control strategies to discover which ones would work best for you. Look for disease resistant peach cultivars as well. See [Peach and Nectarine Insect, Mite, and Disease Control](#).

Peach Varieties for CT	Hardiness	Notes
Crimson Rocket Columnar Peach	Hardy (-12 to 15 F.)	Full size, yellow flesh. Ideal dessert peach. Grows 16' tall and 6' wide. Ripens mid-August
Curlfree	Zones 5-8	Resistant to leaf curl disease. Yellow flesh, juicy fruits. Great for cooking, preserving. Ripens in July. Vigorous.
Flamin' Fury Jumbo Peach (PF 24-007)	Zones 5-8	Very large, red blush peaches can weigh over one pound. Ripens early August.
Gala	Zones 5-8	Flavorful, less fuzzy peach. Ideal fresh or for canning. Ripens mid-July.
Harbinger	Zones 5-9	Good quality small to medium sized, clingstone, yellow fleshed peach. Requires thinning. Vigorous and productive
Harmony	Zones 5-9	Large flavorful peach. Ripens in late August.
Intrepid	Zones 4-8	Yellow flesh fruit is great to bake with. Ripens mid-August. Blooms late to avoid frost damage.
Reliance	Zones 4-8	Yellow flesh. Developed at UNH. Very winter hardy. Requires heavy thinning. Medium sized fruit of fair quality.
Red Haven	Zones 5-8	Highly colored, medium-sized. Very productive. Requires heavy thinning. Cold tolerant. Introduced in 1940's by Michigan State University.
Rochester	Zones 5-8	Older variety tolerates wide range of soils. Noted for lovely pink blossoms and long, producing season. Firm marbled flesh.
Saturn	Zones 5-8	Flat, doughnut shaped, white flesh, freestone peaches 2 to 3 inches in diameter. Ripens late July.

Nectarine Varieties	Hardiness	Notes
Hardired	Zones 5-8	Good quality, yellow flesh nectarine. Tolerant of bacterial spot and brown rot. Developed in Canada. Requires thinning. Ripens in August.
Mericrest	Zones 5-8	Developed at UNH by Dr. E.M. Meader. Yellow flesh. Good disease resistance. Ripens mid-August.
Nectacrest	Zones 5-8	Developed by New Jersey Exp. Stn. Pure white flesh, pink cheeks, freestone. Vigorous and hardy. Dwarf. Ripens in early September.
Stark Crimson Snow	Zones 5-8	Snow white flesh with crimson skin. Good for fresh eating, cooking and preserves. Cold hardy. Ripens in August.
Stark Sunglo	Zones 5-8	All-purpose nectarine. Cold hardy and productive.

Despite good cultural practices, pests and diseases at times may appear. Chemical control should be used only after all other methods have failed. For pesticide information or other questions please call toll free: 877-486-6271.

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