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Good Time to Consider Fruits and Nuts in Landscape, Says LSU AgCenter Horticulturist

News You Can Use For December 2004

December is a good time to collect and look through nursery catalogs, browse gardening magazines and search the Internet for possibilities of planting fruits and nuts in your yard, according to LSU AgCenter horticulturist Dr. John Pyzner.

"A little planning and some effort can lead to the feeling of accomplishment of growing tasty fruit in your own orchard or landscape," the horticulturist says.

Fruit can be planted in a small orchard or can be used in an edible landscape. Selecting different types and varieties of fruit and nuts to put in the home planting can be enjoyable and also very challenging.

"There are so many types to choose from, and the pictures and descriptions in catalogs always look and sound so good," Pyzner says, adding that selections include both traditional and exotic fruits. Familiar fruits and nuts include pecans, plums, pears, blackberries, figs and blueberries. Unusual fruits include feijoa (pineapple guava), jujube, pawpaw and pindo palm.

Space permitting, you can plant your own backyard orchard. This will enable you to grow a wide variety of fruits without having to consider the landscape value of the plants. You also may be able to grow enough fruit to give or sell some to neighbors. Most people usually have only a limited amount of space, so they must be very selective in what fruit to plant and how it will look in the landscape.

A number of plants have showy blooms that can fit in the landscape. Apples, blackberries, plums, peaches, pears and mayhaw produce showy blooms that are very attractive in the spring. They often require spraying, however, to ensure quality fruit.

Pyzner says some fruits have traditionally been used in the landscape with no thought given to fruit production. Feijoa and loquat have very attractive evergreen foliage, but most plants are seedlings and frequently produce poor quality fruit. Obtaining named varieties with quality fruit will likely require going to mail order or specialty nurseries that specialize in rare fruits. Sometimes plants or propagation wood can be obtained from neighbors and friends who are growing the improved varieties.

Fruit and nut plants also can be functional in the landscape. Blackberries, blueberries, feijoa and American hazelnuts planted as hedges can be used to make



The Japanese plum displays showy flowers in the spring. Winter offers an opportunity to daydream about changing your landscape. See "more details in this story."

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barriers, screens or demarcated areas. Large trees like pecans can provide shade.

Pyzner says a number of factors must be considered when choosing fruits and nuts in the landscape. Climate is very important. For example, frost will eliminate tropical fruits that cannot tolerate cold unless a lot of work and expense is used in protecting plants from the elements.

Many of the subtropical plants such as citrus, feijoa, loquat and Japanese persimmons can tolerate some freezing weather and do very well in some parts of Louisiana.

Variations in temperature between mild and severe winters can vary the success rate of growing subtropical fruit. Loquat, for example, is sensitive to changes. The plant blooms in the fall and winter, and the green fruit remains on the plant all winter and ripens in the spring. It can survive temperatures near 0 degrees F, but the fruit is usually killed by temperatures at 20 degrees F to 25 degrees F. North Louisiana usually has a good loquat fruit crop every three to five years after mild winters, and areas in South Louisiana have fruit crops most years.

Most nontropical fruit species have a rest period or winter dormancy after they lose their leaves. Plants will remain dormant until they receive a specific number of hours of cold below 45 degrees F. This is referred to as a "chilling requirement." Plants that do not receive enough chilling do not bloom and grow properly. Plants that receive too much chilling often bloom early and have the fruit damaged by late freezes.

Fruit species and varieties should be chosen that have chill hours corresponding to your location. North Louisiana normally has between 700 and 1,100 chill hours. South Louisiana has between 400 and 700 chill hours and coastal Louisiana has between 300 and 500.

Pyzner says the final decision about planting fruit or nut trees is the amount of time and work that is needed to maintain the planting. Some fruits are considered high maintenance because of the amount of spraying, pruning, thinning and harvesting that is required. The horticulturist advises to make most of your fruit selections from the low- or mid-maintenance categories. Citrus, blueberry, fig, persimmon, loquat, pears (some varieties) and feijoa are low-maintenance. Muscadine, grape and blackberry are considered medium maintenance. Apple, peach, nectarine, plum, strawberry, bunch grape and mayhaw are considered high maintenance, because of the amount of spraying, pruning and thinning required for quality fruit.

Recommended fruit varieties for Louisiana and growing information is available in the LSU AgCenter publication 1884, "The Louisiana Home Orchard." It can be accessed online only at www.lsuagcenter.com under the publications link.

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