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Passionate for Pets, Plants & People

Apples

Botanical name: *Malus domestica*

Plant type: [Fruit](#)

USDA Hardiness Zones: [3](#), [4](#), [5](#), [6](#), [7](#), [8](#)

Sun exposure: [Full Sun](#)

Soil type: [Loamy](#)

Soil pH: [Neutral](#)

Bloom time: [Summer](#), [Fall](#)

Ever wish you could have an apple orchard in your backyard? You can—in the space of a single tree—if you plant a hedge of dwarf apple trees or an apple espalier.

To get started, let's talk about selection criteria first:

- Look for disease-resistant trees that give you the ability to grow organic fruit or to use fewer chemicals. Maintenance is easier, too.
- Plant dwarf or semidwarf apple trees for ease of care and harvest. Dwarf trees won't take over the yard!
- Buy dormant, bare-root, 1-year-old trees, if possible. Dwarfs and semidwarfs will bear in 3 to 4 years, yielding 1 to 2 bushels per year. Standard-size trees will bear in 5 to 8 years, yielding 4 to 5 bushels of apples per year.
- Apples do not fertilize themselves; ideally, plant at least one other variety that blooms at the same time.
- Choose the right rootstock (foundation). For dwarf trees, make sure that the rootstock is specified. A Bud 9 is a common, hardy tree that's easy to train for USDA Climate Zones 3 to 5. The M9 is probably the most widely planted rootstock, though it would die in frigid winters.

Planting

Spring planting is recommended in central and northern areas. Where fall and winter weather is generally mild and moist, fall planting is successful.

Climate Considerations

- Not every apple grows everywhere. Each variety has a specific number of days needed for fruit maturity.
- Tree tags don't always tell you where the variety grows best, but many catalogs do. Also, [check with your county extension agent](#) for a specific recommendation for your area.
- As a general rule, if a tree is termed hardy, it grows best in Zones 3 to 5. If termed long-season, apple quality will be best in Zones 5 to 8. [Check your zone here.](#)
- Each variety has a number of chill hours needed to set fruit (i.e., the amount of time temperatures are between 32 and 45 degrees F). The farther north you go, the more chill hours an apple variety needs to avoid late spring freeze problems. Check tree tags for chill hour information or ask the seller.

Site and Soil

- Choose a sunny site. For best fruiting, an apple tree needs "full sunlight," which means six or more hours of direct summer sun daily. The best exposure for apples is a north- or east-facing slope.

- Pay attention to the soil. Apple trees need well-drained soil, not too wet. Soil needs to be moderately rich and retain moisture as well as air; mulch with straw, hay, or some other organic material to keep soil moist and provide nutrients as they decompose.

- Dwarf apple trees are notoriously prone to uprooting under the weight of a heavy crop, so you should provide a support system for your hedge. You can grow your trees against a fence, or you can provide free-standing support in the form of a trellis.

Cross-Pollinating

- Cross-pollination occurs between varieties, so you need at least two different varieties, not just two different trees.

- If you lack space for more than one apple tree (or do not want more than one), the pollen can come from somewhere else. You could graft a single branch of another variety onto your tree, rely on a nearby neighbor's tree or crab apple tree, or snip of a flowering branch from another variety at bloom time and set it into a bucket of water at the base of your tree.

- For best results, include a 'Grimes Golden', 'Golden Delicious', 'Red Delicious', or 'Winter Banana' in your planting. These varieties are known pollinators.

- Nursery catalogs will provide pollination charts.

Care

Minimize Pruning of a Young Tree

Pruning slows a young tree's overall growth and can delay fruiting, so don't be in a hurry to prune, other than removing misplaced, broken, or dead branches. There are several techniques to direct growth without heavy pruning. For example:

- Rub off misplaced buds before they grow into misplaced branches.

- Bend a stem down almost horizontally for a few weeks to slow growth and promote branches and fruiting. Tie down with strings to stakes in the ground or to lower branches.

Prune a Mature Tree Annually

Once an apple tree has filled in and is bearing fruit, it requires regular, moderate pruning.

- Prune your mature tree when it is dormant. Completely cut away overly vigorous, upright stems (most common high up in the tree).

- Remove weak twigs (which often hang from the undersides of limbs).

- Shorten stems that become too droopy, especially those low in the tree.

- After about ten years, fruiting spurs (stubby branches that elongate only about a half-inch per year) become overcrowded and decrepit. Cut away some of them and shorten others.

- When a whole limb of fruiting spurs declines with age, cut it back to make room for a younger replacement.

Thin Ruthlessly

- Thin or remove excess fruit. This seems hard but this practice evens out production, prevents a heavy crop from breaking limbs, and ensures better-tasting, larger fruit crop.

- Soon after fruit-set, remove the smallest fruits or damaged ones, leaving four inches between those that remain.

Harvest/Storage

Harvest Patiently. After all this pruning and caring, be sure to harvest your apples at their peak of perfection.

- Pluck your apples when their background color is no longer green.

- Different apple varieties mature at different times, so the harvest season can stretch from August to October.

- At this point, the stem should part readily from the branch when the fruit is cupped in the palm of your hand and given a slight twist around, then up.

- If the apple is overripe and soft, use for cooking!

- Apples keep well for about six months at temperatures between 32 and 45 degrees