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# Growing Plums, Cherries & Apricots in NH Home Gardens

Plums, cherries and apricots, which along with peaches and nectarines are often called “stone” fruits, are flavorful additions to the home orchard if the home garden site is suitable. European plums and sour cherries are quite hardy with selected varieties hardy to -20° F or more. Japanese plums and especially apricots and sweet cherries are less hardy. These fruits are best planted in extreme southern New Hampshire.

A second environmental consideration is the risk of spring frost injury to blossoms. These fruits, especially apricots, bloom in very early spring, often a week or more before apple trees bloom. They should be planted on sites that offer freedom from late spring frosts. Generally, these sites are elevated relative to the surrounding landscape which allows cold air to flow away on clear, cold nights.

***What about growing these fruits in the Great North Woods?*** Sour cherries, European plums on warmer sites in the northern part of the state, and hybrid plums offer the best chance for success.

## **Purchasing trees**

Select varieties that are hardy. Most catalogs offer approximate hardiness ratings. UNH Cooperative Extension offers fact sheets that list appropriate tree fruit varieties for New Hampshire.

Purchase trees from a reputable garden dealer or nursery. There are several mail order nurseries as well that offer quality, bare-root trees.

## **What about dwarf trees?**

All fruit trees are grafted. A piece of vegetative wood (usually a bud for the stone fruits) is grafted onto a rootstock (a tree grown for just that use). Most of these rootstocks will produce a tree that is quite large; in the case of sweet cherries, these “standard-sized” trees often grow to 30 ft in height.

Dwarf rootstocks for plum, cherry, and apricot trees are not readily available for home garden use. Some nurseries now offer sweet cherries on dwarfing rootstocks from the Gisela series. These trees will be smaller and they will fruit earlier in life than full-sized or seeding trees. Since sweet cherry trees can be extremely large, making pest control and pruning difficult, purchasing sweet cherries grafted onto these dwarfing stocks is recommended. For sour cherries, the varieties North Star and Meteor are naturally dwarf.

## **Soil and Site**

Fruit trees will do reasonably well in a wide range of soil types, although they will not tolerate poorly drained soils with a high water table. Stone fruit trees will do best on a site that offers full sunlight all day and should not be planted in the shade of a building or large tree.

Proper soil preparation is an important first step. Soil testing and appropriate recommendations for addressing soil pH and fertility needs are available through your county office of UNH Cooperative Extension. Eradicate perennial weeds, particularly quackgrass prior to planting for best results.

Plant trees in early spring as soon as the soil is dry enough to work (late April through mid-May). If the planting site is not ready when trees arrive from the nursery, unwrap the trees and “heel-in” the roots in moist soil in a shady spot. Plant trees before their buds break. Plant plum, apricot, and cherry trees 15 to 20 feet apart in the home orchard.

### **Planting the Tree**

- 1) Dig a hole large enough to allow the roots to be spread out completely. This usually requires a hole that is wider than it is deep.
- 2) Backfill the planting hole with topsoil. Do not use sod to fill the hole.
- 3) If you purchase a “dwarf” tree, plant the tree with the graft union 2 to 3 inches above the soil surface. The graft union is the point where the variety was grafted onto the rootstock.
- 4) Firm soil around the roots. Backfill the hole 2/3 full, soak in 2 gallons of water, and finish backfilling. If you leave a depression or water catching basin around the tree, be sure to fill it in by autumn to reduce the danger of ice damage to the lower trunk.
- 5) Remove any tags or labels attached to the trees to prevent girdling of the trunks.
- 6) Do not add fertilizer to the planting hole. Trees can be fertilized after rain has thoroughly settled the soil around the roots, about 3 weeks after planting. Apply 1/2 pound of 10-10-10 or its equivalent by spreading it lightly in a wide circle 16 to 20 inches from the tree trunk.

### **Pruning**

Plum, apricot, and cherry trees are pruned and trained annually to develop and maintain tree size and shape. European plums, cherries, and apricots are generally trained to the leader system. In the leader system, a single trunk (or leader as it is called) is maintained. Lateral branches with wide crotch angles are developed. Trees are formed with wide bottoms and narrow tops to insure good light penetration into the tree canopy. Japanese plums are generally pruned in the open center system (similar to peaches), but will do well pruned to the leader system.

Prune in early spring.

### **Leader System Pruning**

#### **Pruning at Planting – Establishing the leader**

Heavily branched (or feathered) one-year-old nursery trees will rarely need pruning at planting except to eliminate oversized branches – branches with a diameter exceeding 1/2 to 1/3 the diameter of the trunk or leader. Remove any vigorous, upright branches that may compete with the leader or trunk for light.

Whenever a branch does need to be pruned, it is important to cut out the entire branch. If you prune offending branches by simply cutting a portion off the end, you will not solve the structural problem the branch is causing. Rather, the branch will re-grow in a vigorous and upright manner, creating unwanted shading of other wood and delayed fruiting. Remove the branch by cutting at the outside edge of the collar that forms where the branch is attached.

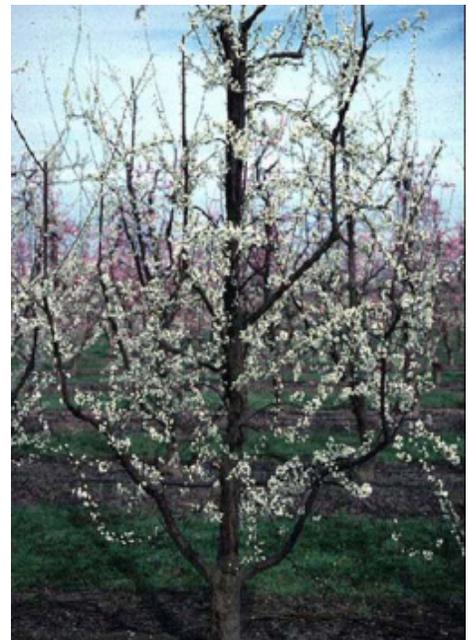


Figure 1: European plum trained to the leader system. Photo: W. Lord



Figure 2. 1 year old sweet cherry tree before pruning. Photo: W. Lord

While well-branched trees are the ideal, you often have to settle for trees that have only a few or perhaps no branches. If the few branches they do have are uniformly distributed around the tree, then no pruning is required.

If the tree is one-sided, the best course of action may be to remove all branches and start over. This will often be the case when a tree comes with only one or two branches. After removing these branches, cut the leader off at a height of 33 - 36 inches above the ground to encourage development of wide-angled branches.



Figure 3. Same tree as figure 2 after pruning. Note that large laterals have been removed. Photo: W. Lord

### Leader System - Pruning in later years

The basic pruning rules practiced in the first year or two of the tree's life do not change as the tree ages, although the size of some pruning cuts might. For leader trained trees, continue to eliminate vigorous, upright branches that might compete with the leader and eliminate any oversized branches that develop.

Some branches that didn't seem too vigorous in years 1 and 2 may become problems, growing at a much faster rate than other parts of the tree. These excessively large branches will need to be removed by cutting them out completely. Some shade problems may develop as growing branches crowd each other. Again, rather than cutting back all branches completely eliminate a branch or two to eliminate shading.

It is essential for the health of the tree that branches larger than 1/3 the diameter of the trunk where they are attached be removed over the first few years of a tree's life.



Figure 4: Mature European plum trained to a leader system before pruning. Photo: W. Lord

### Open Center System Pruning

#### Pruning at planting - Establishing the open center system

If using the open center system for Japanese plums, head the trunk back to 24 to 30 inches at planting. Limbs arising below the heading-back cut should be cut in half to promote the development of strong, wide-angled scaffolds and thinned to leave only the best 3 or 4. Remove any limbs growing 15 inches or less from the ground.

**Open Center System -  
Pruning Young, Non-Bearing Trees**

In spring the year after planting, select 2 to 3 well-developed, wide-angled scaffold limbs and remove other branches entirely.

From the second to the fourth years, remove any branches that grow straight up through or toward the center of the tree. Prune lightly to eliminate overlapping and damaged limbs.

**Open Center System -  
Pruning Bearing Trees**

Maintain tree height at 9 to 10 feet by heading back scaffold branches to an outward growing lateral. Remove weak or diseased branches as well as those that grow up, through or across the center of the tree or downward. The remaining vigorous branches may need to be thinned out to prevent crowding.



Figure 5: Japanese plum trained to the open center system. Photo: W. Lord



Figure 6: Young open center tree before pruning. Photo: W. Lord



Figure 7. Same tree as shown in Figure 6 after pruning. Photo: W. Lord



Figure 8. Mature Japanese plum tree before pruning.  
Photo: W. Lord



Figure 9. Same tree as in figure 8 after pruning to eliminate broken branches, branches that cross one another, and crowding. Photo: W. Lord

### Fertilizing

Manage stone fruit trees to ensure production of 6 to 12 inches of new growth each season. This is accomplished through pruning and fertilization as needed. For most home gardens, an application of 1/2 pound of a complete garden fertilizer (such as 10-10-10) to non-bearing trees and 1 pounds to mature bearing trees is sufficient. Adjust rates according to tree vigor. If trees are growing too vigorously, do not fertilize. If trees are not growing well, double the fertilizer rate. Fertilizer should be applied in May by spreading it uniformly on the surface of the ground under the tree from the drip line in to within 16 inches from the trunk.

### Pollination and Fruit Set

Most European plums and apricots are self fruitful; however, cross pollination often results in larger, more dependable crops. For that reason, 2 or more varieties of each are generally recommended.

Sour cherries are generally self fruitful and a single tree will do well.

Sweet cherries and Japanese plums generally require cross pollination to set crops. Not all combinations work well and specific pollination needs of varieties are usually included in nursery catalog descriptions. The sweet cherry varieties Black Gold and Lapins are self fruitful.



Figure 10. Early Italian European plums ready for harvest. Photo: W. Lord

### Thinning

Plums benefit from fruit thinning. Fruit size will be greater and disease risk reduced due to better drying of fruits after rains and heavy dew. Hand-thin plums in mid-June by reducing clusters of set fruit to single fruits.

## Stone Fruit Varieties for NH Gardens

*Methley*, *Shiro*, and *Ozark Premier* are Japanese plums that do well in southern NH. European plums to try include *Early Italian*, *Green Gage*, *Castleton*, and *Stanley*. In the Great North Woods region of the state, the hybrid plums *Underwood*, *Pipestone*, and *Superior* are good choices.

Sour or pie cherries that have performed well in NH include *Montmorency*, *North Star*, and *Meteor*. The later two are natural dwarfs and work especially well in home gardens.

On warmer sites in the southern part of the state, the sweet cherry varieties *Black Gold*, *Sam*, *Lapins*, and *Hedelfingen* are good choices as are the apricot varieties *Goldrich* and *Harogem*.

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