

Growing Fruit Trees in Dunedin

This month Jason Ross from local business Habitate shares his expertise in successfully growing fruit trees in our climate.

Dunedin has a great fruit growing climate, in fact the types of fruit that we can grow are somewhat limited by the relatively mild summers, rather than the winter cold. In order of reliability the best options are apples, followed by pears, plums, cherries, quinces, peaches, apricots, and figs. The key is to plant the best varieties (cultivars) of each type of fruit. They must suit our climate generally, and specifically the microclimate of their position.

Seek out varieties that are naturally disease resistant, unfortunately most of the familiar varieties from the industrial fruit industry are not. A 'Braeburn' apple tree for example will be covered in black spot fungi, whereas most of the older pre-chemical spray era varieties such as 'Discovery' will be spotless. The Tree Crops Association has tested these old varieties and shown them to be higher in anti-oxidants and flavonoids, and you will find them to have a richer, more complex flavour.

Also take care to choose varieties so that you have the maximum spread of harvest dates, avoiding an overwhelming glut of fruit. In Dunedin we can be eating tree fruit from mid-January with 'Wilson's Early' Plums, till mid-winter with 'Merton Russet' or 'Cornish Aromatic' apples fresh off the tree (and longer if stored). If you have a larger orchard, design your layout so that the fruit will ripen in succession across the rows, simplifying harvest and management.

Take your time to research – ask neighbours, garden clubs, and local nurseries.

Planting an orchard is a chance to enhance your landscape, to create a unique sense of place by working with your landform. The best way to do this is to plant your orchard in rows exactly on contour (use a homemade water level or borrow a laser level) rather than in line with fences etc. Space your trees in a row so that when mature their canopies will just touch. Space the rows so that there is generous room for a scythe, tractor or mower. Between trees plant with support species such as comfrey and nitrogen fixing trees; you could also include berries for a more diverse and faster yield.

Order your bare rooted plants (bagged trees by comparison have their roots severely cut back) in early autumn, and plant in winter. Dig a hole only just deeper than the root system, but much wider, and plant so the upper roots are just covered with good topsoil mixed with 10% compost (more is not better). Then mulch with compost, seaweed, manure etc., topped off with woodchip to feed soil fungi (these form beneficial relationships with fruit tree roots).

If you pamper your trees in the first three years; they will reward you for decades with ever increasing yields of delicious fruit. Follow the harvest with a mobile chicken run under the trees, or a beehive or two, and you'll be on your way to your own beautiful little ecosystem.

Good Food Dunedin is a Dunedin City Council-led initiative, supported by individuals, communities, organisations and businesses who share a vision to transform Dunedin into a thriving, resilient, and food-secure city.