

An Easy Orchard

By David Sumner

The words 'easy' and 'orchard' don't usually appear together in the same sentence. But there are tree fruits that are easy to grow that aren't well known to the public. In most cases, these fruits are not familiar to the public because they are too perishable to be commercially viable. But homeowners with very basic skills could easily grow these fruits in their backyards for fresh eating.

As Master Gardeners, we are often asked how to grow tree fruits. Usually the public is interested in the fruits they are familiar with—apples, pears, peaches, plums, and cherries. Due to considerable disease and insect pressures these fruits are very challenging to grow in central Virginia.

Some years ago I tried to grow apples and pears in my backyard. I soon encountered a host of diseases including fire blight, apple-cedar rust, sooty blotch, and fly speck. In addition, swarms of insects would devour first the leaves of the trees and then later the fruit. After several years of frustration I removed the diseased trees.

Then I investigated other fruits that are easier to grow but not as well known. After much experimentation I have found three tree fruits that have performed well for me. These are the paw paw, jujube, and persimmon.

Paw Paw

The paw paw is a small native fruit tree that grows wild in the understory of our forests. Breeders have improved on the wild paw paw and developed some excellent cultivars.

The cultural requirements of the paw paw are minimal and demand little of the home grower.



The fruit of the paw paw resembles a mango.

When ripe it is about as soft as an overripe avocado. The flesh is soft and custard-like and eaten with a spoon. The flavor has been described as like vanilla custard with a hint of tropical flavors.

JuJube

The jujube is a small tree from Asia that grows well in hot, dry summers. It makes an attractive ornamental with glossy leaves, a somewhat contorted shape, and thorny branches. It produces a small green fruit which ripens to a rich mahogany, resembling a date. The flesh is crisp and sweet, similar to an apple in taste and texture. The fruit can be dried to concentrate the sweetness similar to dates. The jujube is easy to grow with no significant pests or diseases.



Persimmon

The persimmon comes in two species that are of interest to the home grower—the American and Asian species. When under ripe persimmons are astringent, which is an unpleasant bitter or puckering mouth feel caused by the tannins in the fruit. But a completely ripe persimmon is among the sweetest of fruits, with a complex, caramel-like flavor.

Persimmons ripen late in the fall and have an attractive habit of hanging on the tree after the leaves have fallen from the trees. The Asian species has non-astringent varieties that can be picked and eaten when not fully ripe, extending the period of harvest.



Summary

These three fruits complement each other nicely time wise, with the paw paws ripening in late August and early September, the jujubes in September and October, and the persimmons in November and December. By adding a few berry bushes that ripen in early summer, the home grower can have fresh fruit from the backyard from June through December, seven months of the year.

These fruits have much to offer the home grower, delivering delicious fruit for very little effort. Almost anyone with a little sunlit space can grow this 'easy orchard'.