

Growing Peaches in Western Montana



Peaches are considered the "Queen" of the fruits and second only to apples in popularity as a deciduous tree fruit because of their fine flavor and many uses as a fruit. Popular uses for peaches include fresh eating, pies, cobbler, and preserves. Fresh peaches provide respectable amounts of the antioxidant vitamins A and C in addition to potassium and fiber.

There are hundreds of different peach cultivars (varieties), but basically there are two types, the freestones and the clingstones. In freestone types, the flesh separates readily from the pit. In the clingstone type, the flesh clings tightly to the pit. The flesh may be either yellow or white. Freestone types are usually preferred for eating fresh or for freezing, while clingstone types are used primarily for canning. Peach trees are subject to some insect pests and diseases. Frequently the season's crop may be lost either by flower bud kill due to low winter temperatures or to bloom kill by late-spring frosts. The best chances for success in growing peaches in the home landscape result from selecting bud-hardy cultivars, protecting the bloom from late-spring frosts, and managing diseases.

- **Reliance:** Developed in New Hampshire, it has better than average bud hardiness. Fruit quality is fair, freestone, ripens early August. Fruit sets heavy
- **Contender:** This exceptionally hardy variety, perfect for northern gardens, consistently yields large crops of sweet, juicy, medium-to-large fruit. Disease-resistant to bacterial spot. Cold-hardy. Freestone. Ripens late August- September.
- **Stellar Varieties** (Red Star, Coral Star, Glowing Star, Autumn Star) Stellar™ varieties are reported to have high quality, good fruit size, high color, firm flesh, and good resistance to bacterial spot and canker.
- **Frost:** A mid-season ripening fruit, Frost features wonderful yellow-fleshed freestone peaches with a light red blush over greenish yellow skin. Peach leaf curl resistant.
- **Veteran:** Canadian cross of early Elberta, Veteran is a freestone peach good for canning and fresh eating. It has been grown for years in the Missoula area. Flavorful fruit is yellow with a red blush on a vigorous self-fertile tree.

- **Polly:** Freestone white fleshed medium-sized fruit that contains high sugar content. Blooms later, ripens mid-late season
- **Bailey's Hardy:** Good size and eating quality. The sweet, juicy flesh is excellent for fresh eating, sauces and baking. Semi-Freestone mid-season ripening
- **McKay's:** Great to eat, bake and cook with. They're large, juicy, and freestone. Mid Season ripening.
- **Red Haven:** One of the early peaches. Colors a beautiful red and golden yellow. Flesh is firm, smooth textured and fine flavored. Fruit is medium size, round, uniform and appealing. Good for freezing, canning, and shipping. Disease resistant.

Peach Site Selection, Soil Preparation, and Planting

Peaches require full sunlight and should not receive shade from buildings or tall trees. If possible, select a site with a high elevation so that cold air can drain away from the tree on a cold night during bloom. The best site will have well drained sandy loam type soil. Peach tree roots or rootstocks will not tolerate soils where water remains on or near the surface for more than one hour after a heavy rain.

The peach tree is relatively susceptible to damage by cold temperatures. Temperatures of -13°F or lower will generally destroy most peach flower buds and temperatures lower than about -17°F will cause damage to limbs, trunks, and leaf buds. Trees can be damaged by rapid temperature drops following a period of mild weather in early fall or early spring. In high-altitude locations, bright sunlight causes alternate day/night temperature fluctuations that cause stress in the bark and trunks of young fruit trees and make them crack. During the first 2 to 3 years after planting, the trunks of young trees should be wrapped with burlap or white tree wrap/corrugated tubes to lessen the tendency for damage.

Prepare the soil one to two years before planting so that soil pH, organic matter, and nutrient status can be modified for the production of peaches.

Peach cultivars do not require cross pollination and set satisfactory crops with their own pollen.

Fertilization of fruit trees should be dictated by a soil test. A soil test should be run every 3 - 5 years. The ideal soil pH for peach production is between 6 and 7. Major problems with micronutrient deficiencies, especially iron and zinc, usually develop when the pH goes above 7.8.

Trees can be fertilized the year after planting. Apply up to 1/2 pound of 10-10-10 or other general fertilizer by spreading it lightly in a wide diffuse band 16 to 20 inches from the tree trunk. Soils high in natural fertility may not need fertilizer in the first year.

Fruit Thinning

Peaches will begin bearing a crop in the third or fourth year. Most peach varieties set far more fruit than can be grown to large size with good quality. Thinning is used to control the number of fruit per tree in order to increase fruit size and quality as well as to insure adequate vegetative growth in the trees.

The earlier fruit is thinned from a tree, the greater the size response of the remaining fruit. As a rule of thumb, fruit should be thinned within 4 to 6 weeks after bloom. Fruit should be thinned to six to eight inches apart along the fruiting branches.

Training and Pruning

The open center system is recommended for peach and nectarine trees for maximum sunlight exposure, maximum yield, and best quality (Figure 1). Pruning and training should be done in the year of planting and every year after to develop a strong, well balanced framework of scaffolds (a tree with a strong trunk and well positioned side branches); and to maintain the balance between vegetative growth and fruit production.

Immediately after planting, prune the tree back to a height of 26 to 30 inches. Cut off all side branches to leave a whip (a shoot without lateral branches or with lateral branches removed) that is 26 to 30 inches tall. This sounds drastic; however, the best shaped open center trees come from those pruned initially to a whip.

During the first year, remove diseased, broken, and low-hanging limbs. Then remove vigorous upright shoots that may have developed on the inside of the main scaffolds and if left could shade the center.

During the second and third years, remove low-hanging, broken, and/or diseased limbs. To maintain the open vase, remove any vigorous upright shoots developing on the inside of the tree, leaving the smaller shoots for fruit production. Finally, prune the vigorous upright limbs on the scaffolds by cutting them back to an outward growing shoot.

The principles used to develop the trees are used to annually maintain the size and shape of the mature tree. Remove low-hanging, broken, and dead limbs first. Next, remove the vigorous upright shoots along the scaffolds. Lower the tree to the desired height by pruning the scaffolds to an outward growing shoot at the desired height.

Peach trees are not known to be long lived in Western Montana, so if you get 10-15 years of production, that is considered good. Keeping your tree healthy (proper watering, fertilizing and pruning) will be the best way to keeping it productive.

Pruning a new peach tree video:

<https://youtu.be/GGvXhRKR90Y>



Figure 1