

# Growing Fruits

## Community and School Gardens

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Community gardens designed to provide locally grown food for families can be used to grow fruits in addition to the more commonly grown vegetables. There are many common and lesser-known fruits that are suited for planting in community garden situations.

### Lesser-Known Fruit Plants

In Georgia, a lot of attention goes to peaches and blueberries. For commercial production, the goal is to produce a marketable crop, but for a community or school garden, there is less concern for blemish-free fruit as long as it can be harvested without too much time or money invested. The “Fruit Plant Selection Chart” below lists fruit plants with the greatest potential for Georgia community gardens.

### Site Considerations

Almost all fruits require full sunlight (six to eight hours in direct sun) to produce a decent crop. All fruits require soil with good drainage. Planting on a slight slope is advantageous so that cold air drains away, and the plants benefit from warm air rising. Spring frosts can destroy the entire season’s crop. Most community gardens do not have the luxury of space to satisfy all of these requirements; if you have to choose, be sure to at least meet the sunlight requirement.

More detailed information on site requirements for growing fruit plants in Georgia can be found in numerous Extension publications. For more information, visit: <http://extension.uga.edu/garden/garden-fruits-vegetables/index.cfm>.

### Plant Spacing

Except for strawberries, fruit plants are perennials that can grow into large trees. While it is possible to tighten up on the spacing between plants to obtain a higher yield per square foot, it is best to stick with recommended spacing. To save space, consider growing fruit plants along a fence. Pruning trees to grow on a wall even has a fancy name - espalier. Apples and figs can be grown this way, and all the vines (blackberry, grape and kiwi) can be grown on a wall if they are tied up. Other creative ways to incorporate fruit plants into a small space include planting as a hedge and growing vines on entrances and shade arbors.

### Temperature Effects

For fruit plants, there are two concerns with cold hardiness. The first is whether the plant will survive the winter. Most of Georgia is either zone eight or nine, with a few areas of zone seven, on the USDA hardiness zone map. Most fruit plants will survive those temperatures, but Kiwi and Feioja may not survive the coldest temperatures that could occur in the two colder zones. The second consideration is untimely spring frosts. Most fruits bloom in early spring, some much earlier than others. A late spring frost when plants are in bud, bloom or early fruit set can destroy the season’s fruit. A 10-year study of the peach crop in Georgia showed that the harvest was lost one year entirely and reduced two years by 50 percent due to cold weather.



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However, most fruit crops do have a chilling requirement. This means the plants must receive a certain period of cold weather in order to bloom and set fruit. It varies by crop and even variety. In Georgia, most crops receive enough chilling requirement, with the exception of some apple varieties. Before planting apples, be sure the variety selected is suited for warmer climates.

Warm weather can be just as much of a problem for some crops. Georgia's summer heat can be too much for some bunch grapes and raspberries.

## **Pollination and Fruit Set**

Many fruits require more than one variety to ensure a good fruit crop. Not every variety is a suitable pollinator. Ask your nursery person or consult a fruit catalog to be sure the varieties you select match. Also, most fruit crops require or benefit from pollinators, such as honey bees and other insects. Planting other flowering crops to draw pollinators to your garden or placing a hive nearby can improve pollination.

## **Trellis and Support**

Keeping fruit off the ground is only one reason to grow a plant on a trellis. Dwarf apples, for example, require support to prevent the tree from falling over. Vine crops yield greater amounts if trained on a trellis, and trellised fruit plants can be squeezed into small spaces, provided there is adequate soil. Trellis systems are fairly easy to build, and can even serve as a fence or screen for the garden. Use strong materials designed to support a heavy fruit set, especially for crops like muscadine grapes.

## **Insects and Diseases**

All fruits grown in Georgia will experience some damage from insects and/or diseases. It is just too warm in the winter to kill many insects, and the hot, humid summers promote diseases of all kinds. Commercial growers -- even organic growers -- spray their crops with insecticides and fungicides and use other means to help control pests. If someone connected with the garden is willing to apply the treatments and monitor traps, then almost any fruit crop could be grown in a community garden. If any pesticides are used in a community garden, care must be taken to apply them safely and use extra signage to communicate to other gardeners that applications have been made. Most community gardens have policies that prohibit use of pesticides because of the difficulty in properly communicating risk and preventing exposure to other gardeners who use the space. If the community is not willing or able to follow a treatment program, then it is best to avoid fruits that are moderately or highly susceptible to disease and pest insect issues. Since fruit grown for a community garden is not going to be sold at a grocery store, some degree of damage may be acceptable. In many cases, insects can be removed by hand and diseases prevented with good cultural practices. The chart below lists those fruits that are more likely to be attacked by insects or diseases.

# Fruit Plant Selection Chart

Fruit Plant	Pollinator Required	Insect Susceptible	Disease Susceptible	Cold Temperature Hardiness	Heat Tolerance	Trellis / Support
Blueberry	Yes/No	Low	Low	Hardy, spring frost	Excellent	None
Raspberry	No	Low	Med	Very hardy	Dislikes heat	Fence or wire
Blackberry	No	Low	Low	Very hardy	Good	Similar to grape
Grape Bunch	No	High	High	Hardy	Low	Post and wire
Grape Muscadine	Yes/No*	Low	Low	Very hardy	Excellent	Heavy duty wire
Strawberry	Yes/No	Med	High	Hardy	Excellent	None
Apple	Yes	Med	Med	Excellent	Varies, needs cold winter	Wire for dwarf var.
Peach	No	High	High	Hardy; spring frost	Excellent	None
Feijoa	No	Low	Low	Not enough info.	Excellent	None
Kiwi	Yes	Low	Low	Marginally cold hardy	Excellent	Trellis
Fig	No	Low	Low	Most of Georgia	Excellent	None
Pomegranate	No	Low	Low	Unknown	Good	None
Pear	Yes/No*	High	High	Hardy; spring frost	Fair	None
Plum	No	High	High	Hardy; spring frost	Good	None
Cherry	No	High	High	Hardy; spring frost	Fair	None

\* Research cultivars. Some are self-pollinating.

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