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## Starting Your Own Fruit Trees

By Thomas Leo Ogren

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\*Note: This article first appeared in Grandiflora Magazine.

#### Starting Your Own Fruit Trees

Thomas Ogren

I flat out love growing fruit trees and have been crazy about them all my life. Or at least, as much of my life as I can remember. Actually, the very first thing I can clearly recall involved fruit trees.

I was about three, possibly four years old. It was a warm, lazy spring weekend and my older sisters were gone somewhere with my mom, but my dad was home, working in the garage. I wasn't allowed to cross the street by myself, but down the block, across the street, was a beautiful pineapple guava tree growing in the middle of some grouchy old man's lawn. The tree had a huge crop of large, green, totally delicious fruit, but the owner wouldn't let any of us kids pick guavas from his tree, much less climb it. He claimed that we would break the branches. He would however let us have fruit that fell on the ground, but these guavas were generally too soft and mushy.

That day I walked down the street by all by myself, seeing no adults or even any other kids around. I looked at that tree and dashed across the street. The old man was nowhere around and I climbed up his guava tree and started stuffing big, fat guavas in all my pockets. I picked as many as my pockets could hold and climbing back down I did indeed break a few small branches.

Looking both ways (of course!) I ran back across the street with my loot. Back at home I found my dad still in the garage and I showed him my stash, expecting him to yell at me for crossing the street. But dad never did make the connection and thus my first episode of crime was all in all, a total success.

Some fifty years later I now have five guava trees growing in my own yard, all grown from seed. I also have many other fruit trees, all of them homegrown ones.

#### Fruit From Cuttings

Some fruit is so easy to propagate I always wonder why everyone doesn't try it. Grapes, figs, mulberries, and pomegranates are all easy to grow from directly-stuck cuttings. I cut off a piece of dormant wood, 12-18 inches long, and I bury almost all of it in the ground where I want it to grow. I leave at least one good bud above ground. Sometimes to insure a better take, I'll stick five or six such

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cuttings in the same spot. If they all grow, then the next winter I dig up the extra ones and give them to friends. I use cutting wood that grew last year and find that wood that is about pencil thickness or somewhat thicker roots the best.

I recently accidentally discovered a way to get plum wood to root for me. I used a long whip of plum branch (dormant wood) as a stake in a one gallon pot of some fancy gold heart ivy. To my surprise the plum wood rooted and started to grow the next spring. I now do this on purpose, using plum wood that is from last year's vigorous growth. I select plum whips 2 to 3 foot long, with no branching on them, and stick each one all the way down into the center of a gallon pot of some well-rooted perennial flowers or herbs. A surprising number of these plums grow, and since they are "on their own root," they don't need to be budded or grafted. Try it.

### From Seed

I have a spot in my backyard next to my compost heap, and here I toss any and all old pits from plums, apricots, peaches, and nectarines. I toss apple and pear seeds in here too. At the end of the summer I shake an inch or so of old compost over the area and see what grows. Since I do this every year, I always have a ready supply of seedlings each year.

In the winter months, or in the very early spring months if you live in a zone 4–7 area, dig up some of these year-old seedlings, bare root, and pot them up one to each one gallon pot. I use a 50–50 mix of potting soil and garden dirt.

I then water the pots, set the potted seedling on a table, clip off most of the top, leaving 4–6 inches of trunk above ground, and then cleft graft the seedling. Cleft grafting is, I think, the easiest method and it works well with apricot, peach, plum, nectarine, quince, apples and pears. I use a thin bladed knife and tap it (tapping the back of the knife blade with a small hammer or a piece of wood) directly into the center of the cut seedling, going down only about one inch. I cut scion wood (whatever you want to convert your seedling to) that is from last year's growth. I like to use scion wood that has a diameter that is slightly smaller than the diameter of the seedling I'm going to graft it to. The grafts, or scions, should be about 3 to 4 inches long and each should have several good, dormant buds. The scions can be cut to shape with a sharp pocketknife. Try to get your scions cut smoothly, with a gradual taper. The scions are then tapped into place in the split seedling (the rootstock), making sure that the cambiums of both scion and rootstock match on at least one side. The cambium is the thin green layer of wood that is just inside the outer bark. To keep your work from drying out, cover the entire finished graft with a thick coating of grafting tar or grafting wax. I also put a dab of the tar or wax directly on the exposed cut tip of the scion. Be careful as you do this, not to knock the scion out of contact with the rootstock cambium.

Now, unless a kid, bird, or a cat bangs into this graft and knocks the scion askew, if you did it right, come springtime the scion will sprout and grow. Voila! You've got a grafted fruit tree.

You can graft peach onto almond, apricot, plum, peach or nectarine rootstock, and visa versa. For sandy soils peach or nectarine make the best rootstocks, but for heavy clay soils, plum is by far the best. Apples can be grafted on apple seedlings, as can pears. Pear can also be grafted on apple stock. If so inclined, scion wood from quince can also be grafted onto apple or pear. An apple or pear grafted onto a quince rootstock will be a dwarfed tree. If your soil is clay, a pear rootstock grows best. If sandy or loamy, apple is preferred.

I grow these new fruit trees on in the gallon pots for a year, making sure to cut off any sucker wood that arises from below the graft. Keep them well fertilized and watered and they will often grow 3–5 feet in

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one summer's time. The next year either plant them or give them away to friends.

If you have a potted fruit tree seedling where the graft fails to take, simply cut off the unsuccessful grafted part. You can re-graft it the next dormant season. If you have year old seedlings left in the ground that you won't get around to digging and grafting, consider chopping them off just above the ground in the late fall. The next spring these seedlings will grow up with multiple trunks. The next winter dig your second-year seedlings with multiple trunks, thin them back to the strongest 2 or 3 stems, and then cleft graft each of the stems to something different. I have made many three-in-one trees this way, part plum, part apricot, and part nectarine. These make extra nice presents. You can of course just as easily graft each branch to a different cultivar of the same species, such as three different kinds of plum on the same rootstock. A tree like this is often very fruitful, since it will cross-pollinate itself.

### Budding

Just a little here on budding. In zones 3–8 most budding is done in May, June or early July. The easiest method is shield budding. A T cut is made on the rootstock stem, cutting through the outer bark and the cambium, down to the hardwood. Next you cut a thin, shield-shaped slice of wood (from scion wood of the cultivar you wish to bud), containing one dormant bud. This shield will be about 3/4th of an

inch long. This bud is then inserted in the T cut under the bark of the seedling rootstock. I use thin, clear plastic tie tape to wrap the bud up tightly. I will sometimes cut a tiny slice in the middle of the tape and wrap the tape over the tip of the bud itself, which should just peak out of the sliced portion of the tape. The tape serves to keep the bud in close contact with the rootstock and also to keep the bud graft from drying out.

Keep an eye on the budded stem for several weeks and by then if the bud and the shield are still plump and green, consider it a take. Cut off the rest of the stem half an inch above the new bud graft, and this will force the new bud.

Budding is not quite as easy to do as grafting, at least not at first. It has several advantages though. You can bud when the weather is nice and if the bud doesn't take, you can try it all over again in a different spot. Budding is easiest on thicker rootstocks.

I find that for me I have the best luck budding roses, apples, pears and apricots. Plums can be a little trickier. Cherries, by the way, are considerably more difficult to graft and bud than are the other stone fruits.

If you are lucky enough to know an old gardener who knows how to graft, ask him or her to show you how to cut your scions. A little practice always helps as does a sharp knife. There are many books with drawings of cleft grafts and these too can be used as guides. It may sound a tad snobby, but once you can graft your own fruit trees, you join a rather select group. Almost all gardeners know what grafting is, but not that many actually know how to do it right.

One last thought: cleft grafting is also easy to do on existing dormant fruit trees. There is no reason you can't graft some different varieties on each of your trees. I have an apple tree with about a dozen kinds of apples on it and a pear tree that has five kinds of pear, plus quince and apple growing on it. I also have almonds growing on one branch of a plum tree, four kinds of plums on another tree, and both plum and nectarine on the apricot tree in my front yard. I have five kinds of roses budded on the climbing rose that grows on my front porch. I guess my plants are all mixed up, but then, what can you expect from an old guava thief?

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Tom Ogren is the author of *Allergy-Free Gardening*, and, *Safe Sex in the Garden*, both by Ten Speed Press, Berkeley, California.

Tom Ogren's newest book, 2004, is, *What the Experts May NOT Tell You About: Growing the Perfect Lawn*, from Time Warner Books.

### **Decorating Your Kitchen Garden**

**By Susan Wong**

It's a fact that fruit, vegetables and herbs are very rewarding to grow. There's an extra special flavor to produce you've grown yourself. Moreover, the look and taste of fruit and vegetables are even better than those sold in the supermarket. If you add a few decorative herbs to the mix, there's absolutely no reason why your kitchen garden can't look as good visually as your flower garden.

Even though a kitchen garden has a charm all its own, a kitchen garden is going to be very labor-intensive. If you're not into hard, manual work in your garden, a kitchen garden may not be for you. The only way you're going to get bumper crops of the fruit, vegetables and herbs that you grow is by lavishing tender loving care and attention on them.

Starting your growing early can produce a bountiful crop weeks ahead of its normal time, giving you a home-grown harvest at a time when those fruits and vegetables are particularly expensive in the shops.

With a careful planning, you can make your kitchen garden as visually attractive as possible. If space is at a premium you can choose some of the more decorative vegetables and herbs and plant them in your flower beds.

It is better to choose a sunny site in your garden for most herbs and vegetables to do well. If you are growing fruit trees, you should ensure that they do not cast a shadow over the vegetables and herbs.

Please note that although most herbs are leafy and lacking flowers, they will provide greenery in your garden, even in the winter. Just exercise a little thought as to where to place them and think in terms of what your garden will look like in each of the seasons and factor this into your planning.

Different from most plants, herbs will normally do very well when planted in containers, so they are an excellent option even if you don't have much space in your garden. Tall herbs can be planted at the back of a traditional flower garden and low-growing herbs make excellent flower garden borders.

The normal method of growing vegetables is in regimented rows. If they are kept properly weeded, this can still look good. Again, if you don't have much space, you can still grow a large range of vegetables in containers e.g. peas and potatoes. Some vegetables are even attractive enough to be planted amongst the flowers – but remember that you are going to have gaps once the vegetables are harvested.

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Even if you do not have several acres worth of orchard plot, there is a large range of fruit that you can grow. Small apple trees can grow in pots on the patio, you can grow strawberries in containers and there are even certain varieties of cordon-trained apples and pears that can be grown against a garden fence.

Nearly all fruit trees prefer a sunny site. You will certainly suffer from poor crops if you allow frost to damage the blossom on apple and pear trees. Pears are particularly vulnerable because they tend to flower earlier than apple trees. If you don't have space in abundance but still want to try your hand at fruit growing then you should look at planting trained fruit trees such as espaliers, cordons and fans

against a fence or wall. They can look very decorative and take up very little room.

You will enjoy growing and harvesting food for your own kitchen table in from your own kitchen garden. Is this wonderful? You know how your vegetables and fruits are grown without any toxic. Is it a relief for you to know that what you are eating is free from pesticide.

Susan Wong maintains a number of metal detector websites, including

,

, and

. Please visit his websites and find more interesting articles about metal detector.



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