

# **SUTTONS** Planting & Growing Guide for your Fruit Trees & Grape Vines

We hope that you will find this guide useful and recommend that you read at least the introduction and sections on planting and after care before planting your trees.

## **Introduction**

Our range of fruit and nut trees has been carefully chosen for their suitability for the modern garden. Knowing that space can often be at a premium we have selected trees that will crop reliably yet will not easily become large and uncontrollable. Through working with some of the leading growers in Britain and Europe we are able to offer the very latest varieties and also include the best selections of some old favourites. By now you will probably have chosen your trees, so the purpose of this guide is to help you to give them the best possible start and provide the aftercare needed to pick delicious heavy crops in the shortest possible time - in many cases beginning in the year after planting!

We supply well developed 'feathered maiden' trees which will be between 18 months and two years old when you receive them. The trees are of 'professional' quality and are from the same plantations as those which supply the best commercial growers. Your trees have thus had every cultural care taken to enable them to establish rapidly and crop heavily in their early years. Most trees will show a good degree of 'feathering' (the development of side branches), the extent of this is dependant on variety and some, such as Bramley apple for instance only naturally feather from around the third year. Special cultural techniques are used at the nursery to promote good feathering.

Your trees will have been carefully pruned and root pruned at the nursery before despatch and so are perfect for planting straight away.

## **Position**

Fruit trees will grow well on most soil types provided the ground is not waterlogged. Plenty of sunlight is essential however and areas of deep shade should be avoided. Areas that have previously grown fruit should not be used as this removes the risk of 're-plant disease'.

## **Ground Preparation and Planting**

Soil should be well cultivated a few days before planting to at least two spade depths and a generous amount of garden compost or well rotted manure incorporated. A dressing of bone meal at 3-4oz per sq. yd. (105-140g per sq. m.) may also be applied. We advise that your trees are planted as soon as possible after receipt. If this is not possible trees can be kept in a cool place such as a garden shed for up to a week provided the roots remain moist.

If planting is not possible within this time, 'heel' the trees into a sheltered spot in the garden by digging a hole and firming soil over the roots. When planting into final position a hole should be dug that is around 6in wider than the spread roots of the tree and deep enough to allow the tree to be comfortably planted at the depth that it was growing on the nursery (a soil mark on the stem should indicate this). This should ensure that the union on grafted trees is around 6in above soil level. If a tree stake is used this should be inserted before planting to avoid root damage. Check that the soil at the bottom of the hole is loose after previous cultivation; if not then loosen to ensure that developing roots can easily penetrate.

Before planting the trees, roots should be soaked for about 1 hour. Plant by placing tree into hole and spreading roots. Fill using layers of soil, firming each one with the foot before proceeding with the next. The final layer should be left loose to allow easy ingress of water to the roots. Water in well after planting.

Many fruit trees have relatively shallow root systems and we strongly recommend that a high quality stake is used that can be left in place for a number of years. To prevent damage use a purpose made soft tree tie that can be loosened periodically as the tree grows. A very effective and inexpensive alternative is to use a pair of ladies tights tied in a figure of eight around stake and tree, this will secure the tree and act as a cushion against wind rock.

## **Aftercare**

In the spring your young tree will soon break into leaf and provision of adequate moisture will be vital. This will certainly involve regular watering in hot dry weather, at other times do not over water as this will encourage shallow rooting. A useful aid to watering is a piece of drainpipe which has holes drilled through it, sink this into the soil next to the stake prior to planting and it will allow water to be easily introduced at root level. Keep the area around your trees free from weeds as weed competition will retard their development.

A summer mulch of straw, compost or well rotted manure will be beneficial to retain moisture and also to provide a trickle of nutrient. Apply when the soil is wet (after a storm is ideal!) and take care to avoid the mulch touching the trunk of the tree.

## Pruning

The basis of all pruning is to maintain a balanced tree with a pleasing shape and a good open structure that allows plenty of light and air to get to the ripening fruits. Poorly placed, damaged and diseased branches should be removed and a constant supply of new branches encouraged as the younger wood is far more productive and gives fruit of the highest quality. To this end as a rule of thumb it is usually better to over prune rather than the reverse. Pruning is often a matter of imagination and over time you will become used to the way in which the removal of one branch will affect the development of others. More detailed advice on pruning can be found later in the sections on the different species.

## Fruit 'Set' and Thinning

Once established you can expect your fruit trees to be highly productive and it is quite likely that even a youngish tree will yield a greater number of fruits than can be easily consumed! Most species and in particular apples, pears and plums will benefit greatly from fruit thinning. The judicious removal of some of the developing fruitlets will result in fewer but much higher quality fruit ripening and invariably the overall weight of fruit will be greater.

Your trees will naturally lose a proportion of their immature fruits in June, a phenomenon known as June Drop and thought to be a result of competition for moisture and nutrients, normally the weakest fruits will drop. Thinning should take place after the June Drop usually in early July. Apples and pears should be thinned to two fruits per cluster leaving the largest fruit on the tree (excepting the 'king' fruit which is the large often misshapen fruit at the centre of each cluster - this should be removed). In most years plums 'set' far more fruits than the tree can comfortably bear and dramatic thinning will avoid broken branches and give high quality fruit, as many as three quarters of plums can be thinned. Peaches and nectarines should be thinned to give a space of about 8" (20 cm) between fruit, modern apricots have the ability to carry all set fruit to maturity with little reduction in quality but thinning to allow 3-4" (7-10 cm) between will result in even larger fruit. Cherries, medlar, nuts and mulberry will not need to be thinned.

## Pollination

In spring in all but the most isolated situations, the garden is visited by a great number of pollinating insects. Often these insects travel significant distances and alight on a number of fruit trees along the way, the strong likelihood therefore is that they will bring useful pollen from your neighbours and introduce it to your trees. It is highly likely therefore, that in most circumstances, effective pollination will not be a barrier to the cultivation of plentiful crops of fruit.

## Apples

Apple cultivation can be adapted to a wide range of growing styles depending on space and individual preference. Here we describe the more classic styles together with some exciting modern innovations which enable a heavy crop of fruit to be grown in the smallest of spaces. A number of these styles can also be used for other fruit crops (see relevant section).

### Bush

Probably the most widely seen style of apple and, well grown, can be a highly productive method. The aim is to arrive at an open centred tree with a maximum of six main branches which form the 'backbone' of the tree for life. Sub branches of these will bear most of the fruit and these are removed, allowing replacements to grow, as they reach about four years old. This will maintain the bulk of the tree in a 'young' state to ensure maximum productivity. Bush trees can be planted about 10-12' (3-3.5m) apart.

Once planted the central leader (main stem) should be removed at a point just above the highest side branch or feather. This will encourage the feathers to develop and the strongest and best placed ones should be selected as the main frame of the tree. Over the next three seasons all that is needed is to cut these back by about one third in winter to encourage sub branch development. When, from year 4, older sub branches are removed make sure that the cut is made at a union with another as this will maintain a healthy productive branch structure.

Aim to limit the height of the tree to around 8' (2.4m) and expect your tree to be yielding up to 50lb (22kg) of fruit once it reaches 5 years of age.

### Central Leader

Another very popular and traditional method which gives regular heavy crops and allows plenty of light into the tree. Trees are planted at 8' (2.4m) apart. Each tree needs a central supporting stake to about 6' (1.8m) high.

Once planted cut back the main stem by about one third, this allows the rapid development of side branches and these are restricted to a maximum of 10. The most central of these branches becomes the new leader and this is allowed to run up the supporting post to a height of no more than 7' (2.1m). The remaining branches will radiate out from this. Sub branches along the length of these will bear the fruit. To keep fruiting wood young and productive the main branches are removed every four or five years allowing a new replacement to grow. A 5 year old tree can be expected to produce around 40lb (18kg) of fruit.

## Pears

Pears are a very rewarding crop as they are very easy to grow, suffering little in the way of pests and diseases and if properly ripened are among the most delicious of all tree fruit. Unlike some other species they seem to improve with age and even very old trees can be highly productive so a pear tree is certainly an investment for life!

Most of the growing styles and pruning methods used for apples can be applied to pears and they naturally produce good quantities of fruiting spur.

Bush pear trees can be grown in the following way, planting 10-12' (3-3.5m) apart. Once planted the central leader (main stem) is cut back to the highest side branch or feather. This will encourage to feathers to develop and these should be limited to 8 good branches in a tight 'wine glass' shape. At the end of the first growing year these branches should be cut back by half, this will promote the development of fruiting spur which is then pruned back in turn to three buds.

By this method a good fruiting habit will be established which can then be left to develop naturally for several years with just the odd damaged or poorly position branches removed.

Pears are demanding of water and should never be subjected to drought conditions. In particular, regular watering in the month following flowering will bring great dividends in terms of fruit quality. An application of a good slow release nitrogenous fertiliser at around the third week in August will greatly improve the following years fruit bud. This can be provided as a mulch of manure or compost or other organic proprietary material.

## Plums & Gages

The plum is a very easy fruit to grow in the garden and is capable of yielding huge crops. Plums can be grown as a bush tree yet most modern crops are produced by cultivation in the central leader style. Once the main framework of the tree is established little extra pruning is required beyond removal of damaged or badly placed wood.

In the early years plums can be encouraged to fruit heavily by the tying down of branches. A series of pegs is placed in the ground around the tree and branches are bent over past the horizontal and tied to them by a length of soft string. This interruption of the upward growth habit stresses the tree and encourages the formation of fruit bud along the bend.

Plums will also benefit greatly from fruit thinning, removing fruitlets to a population that is likely to be consumed. The reward will be a superb crop of much larger fruits than would otherwise have been obtained.

Birds can be a serious problem with plums. Bullfinches and other members of the finch family (including sparrows) can easily strip a tree of embryo fruit bud over the winter. Damage can be hard to spot as only the tender heart of the bud is nipped out. Black cotton thread wrapped around the tree to form a web will deter these birds without harming them. The best way of applying this is to place a cotton reel on a slender stick, attach the end of the thread to the tree and walk around the tree a few times raising the stick and lowering as you go!

## Cherries

The combination of modern, self fertile varieties and the new Gisela 5 rootstock on which our cherries are grown means that garden cherry growing can be a very rewarding experience with regular heavy crops being very much the norm. A free growing bush tree is the best growing style and because of the nature of the tree that we deliver, little need be done after planting. Growth will be quite rapid for the first couple of years but then the influence of the rootstock and the formation of fruit bud will slow the tree down giving a much more easily controlled plant compared with older kinds.

Pruning can be limited to the removal of unwanted branches from time to time as necessary, especially those which cross or rub together. This should be carried out at blossom time.

As with plums, fruit bud formation in the young tree can be encouraged by the tying down of branches. Lower branches are tied down to an angle of 90 degrees to the trunk either to pegs in the ground or to the trunk itself, the reduction in sap flow and increase in stress causes the increase in fruit bud. Branches should be tied down in August of the first year and left in place until the following June.

## Cobnuts and Filberts

These are best grown as a bush tree with an open centre giving the classic wine glass shape.

The young tree is naturally somewhat smaller than other species and will need little attention after planting, although care should be taken to ensure plenty of moisture is available. Growth may be slow to start though the tree will soon grow away.

Encourage a short leg with about 12 main branches and keep 'spur pruned' by shortening side branches to 3" (7.5cm). The nuts will be ready to pick from early September and are delicious eaten green. Leftovers can be stored up to Christmas when they will darken and mature.

## Grapes

Grape vines are best grown on a trellis or against a wall in a warm sunny spot. Left to their own devices they are extremely vigorous and will produce many small bunches of grapes. It is far better to cultivate them such that the growth can be controlled as in this way fewer bunches are set but their quality is greatly enhanced.

After planting limit the growth to a maximum of two main stems and train these along the support. Laterals will develop along these stems and it is here that the bunches will form. Each winter all laterals should be cut back to 2 buds from the stem and the main stem(s) allowed to grow about 1' (30cm) each year before stopping.

Allow two bunches of grapes to form at each lateral and then stop the growth of each lateral after the fruit has set at a point two buds past the second bunch.

Vines produce a great deal of green growth in each season and respond well to nitrogenous fertiliser - 'blood fish and bone' is particularly recommended.

## Kiwi Fruit

The Kiwi is a vigorous climber and if allowed can reach a height of 30' (10m). The plants should be trained up a strong trellis, pergola or wire supports on a south facing wall. Some Kiwi varieties are either male or female. In this case it will be necessary to grow male and female varieties to obtain fruit. Other varieties are self fertile and only one plant needs to be grown to obtain fruit.

The plants can be grown against a wall to which wires have been attached or free standing wires attached to stout posts. Wires should be spaced 12" (30cm) apart with the lowest wire 18" (45cm), and the highest 6' (180cm) above soil level.

The plants will grow in any moisture retentive, well drained soil. It is important the soil remains moist especially in periods of rapid growth. The position should be sheltered and in full sun to aid ripening of the fruit. The plants are fully hardy but the flower may need protection in colder areas. When male and female varieties are being grown they should be planted 5' (1.5m) apart. Incorporate well rotted garden compost into the soil and a general fertiliser such as Growmore at a rate of 2oz per sq. yd. (70g per sq. m). Against a wall, allow 8-10" (20-25cm) between the plant and its base.

After planting cut back the plant to just above the bottom wire. Train the lateral shoots horizontally along the wires stopping them when they have filled the allotted space. Stop the plant when it has reached the required height. Fruit is produced on laterals growing from the main framework. These are stopped at seven leaf joints beyond the fruit. Laterals formed on these shoots should be pruned out. Kiwis fruit on mature wood that is one year old or more. Fruiting declines after three years or so. Pruning is a matter of wood replacement once the framework has been achieved, with older laterals being removed to allow new growth to take its place. Excessive new growth should also be removed in summer as otherwise the plant will become over-shaded by itself thus hindering ripening.

Pick the fruits in autumn before the first frosts. Store in a cool, frost free place for a month before use to allow the fruit to fully ripen.

**For further reading we recommend 'The Fruit Garden Displayed' by Harry Baker (RHS Publications)**

**Suttons, Woodview Road, Paignton, Devon, TQ4 7NG 0870 220 2899**