

You have decided to plant some new fruit trees. The job now is to decide what would be the best variety. The pictures look luscious but how do you know if it is going to taste good? The answer is you won't unless you have had the opportunity to taste the fruit last year when it was at peak ripeness. Even then, when your trees do begin to bear, your fruit may taste differently because of the degree of ripeness at harvest or because of your fertilization and irrigation practices. The key is to look at the specific characteristics you would like to have in a fruit and in a tree. The characteristics include overall tree size, date of bloom and harvest, fruit size, skin color, flesh color, fruit flavor such as sweet or tart, and texture such as firm, crisp, juicy, or melting etc. In foothill/and mountain areas you also want to know if it is a very early bloomer. Early blooms are often killed by frost and limit production. You also want to know if a particular variety will require a pollinizer and whether it is a variety recommended for your climate zone. For example, in warmer climate zones, not all fruit will grow because of a lack of adequate cold or "chilling hours". Here in the foothills and low mountains, we have plenty of chilling hours for any crop. Our greater limitations are late frosts. Another characteristic would be how long the fruit will hold on the tree. Some fruits are harvested over a long period of time such as persimmons. Others must be harvested over a very short period of time, thus requiring immediate processing or a large refrigerator for cold storage. If you don't want to process all your fruit in one day or put your fruit in cold storage, look for varieties with an extended harvest period.

Tree size is also an important factor, which is most often controlled by the type of rootstock that the scion or top part of the tree is grafted on to. There are basically three sizes: a genetic dwarf tree, a dwarf or semi-dwarf and a standard tree. If you have very little space and don't want to have to do a lot of pruning to keep trees small, then look for genetic dwarf varieties, also called "Patio" varieties. These are varieties in which the scion or above ground portion has been bred to have very short spaces between the buds so they stay extremely small. They make great ornamental trees for small spaces. The next size would be the dwarf or semi-dwarf. These trees are great for limited space gardens but for those who would like to have specific fruit varieties grafted on top. The dwarfing or size control comes from the rootstock on which the scion is grafted in addition to pruning and training methods. The largest size tree would be a standard variety. These can become fairly large trees. However, it is best to keep trees as small as practical by pruning often during the growing season and during the winter months. That way you avoid having to climb onto a ladder to spray or harvest. We call these trees EZ Pick or Fruit Bushes.

You also need to know if the selected tree variety requires a pollinizer. If you only had room for one tree you might look for one that is self-fertile such as a Stella Cherry. In many cases though, trees will set adequate fruit in the home garden even without a pollinizer. You could also purchase a tree that has multiple varieties on the same tree or you can plant multiple trees in the same planting hole to maximize pollination efforts.

Finally, fruit characteristics are the most important factors. Doing advanced research and knowing what you really want is helpful. For example, if you wanted a white flesh nectarine or peach that ripened in early July so you could make peach ice cream for the 4th, then you would like for something like Sugar Lady peach or Arctic Rose nectarine (from Dave Wilson Nursery), both of which ripen in late June to early July. If you wanted an apricot for sun drying then my

pick would include Patterson or Tilton. Three great sources for variety information can be found on the Internet at <http://homeorchard.ucdavis.edu/> or at www.lecooke.com or <http://www.davewilson.com>

All these sites have home orchard information and will help you choose varieties well adapted to your area.

In my next fruit tree notebook, we will discuss specific training and pruning methods we can use to control tree height and shape.