



Factsheet #4: Planting Fruit Trees
updated May 2020

Context

Planting trees can be one of the most stressful steps in a new fruit grower's life; choosing a site for a tree that can live decades is a big decision and digging into a Yukon garden most often reveals soil that is a far cry from the ideal well-drained loam described in gardening books. Microclimate and variations in the soil also mean that small shifts in location can make a big difference to a tree's success; within our own property we are still finding new pockets of more or less well-drained soil and sites prone to more or less frost. With that in mind, we recommend becoming an observer of your own backyard before making final decisions on siting.

Pre-planting Care

If you receive your tree dormant, keep it outside in a sheltered spot until the ground can be worked. If it is in leaf, plant as soon as possible. If you need to wait a while, again keep it in a well-lit location, sheltered from strong wind, errant dogs and soccer balls until planting. Trees in containers need lots of water so keep an eye on soil moisture on a daily basis.

Siting

Choose sites that are protected from prevailing winds, have good drainage and good sun exposure, especially to the south and west. Plant trees at least 10' apart and within 50' of each other for best pollination – apples are insect pollinated. Trees should be at least 20' from established native trees including large willows. Fruit trees need lots of water and can easily be adversely impacted by root competition. Buildings and even fences can provide heat sinks that can protect trees from frost, though be mindful of foundations and fill that will limit root growth and locations where snow slides could damage trees.

Timing

Trees can be planted any time the ground is thawed enough to dig and dry enough to work. Some growers in the southern Yukon have reported better success with spring plantings; we routinely put trees in throughout the growing season and find similar survival rates. If planting after July 15, be mindful of nitrogen levels. Avoid high nitrogen fertilizers as they could stimulate a late flush of growth that will be vulnerable to the first frosts.

Stakes

New trees can be staked to protect from dogs and soccer balls as well as strong gusts of wind. Stakes should allow trees to move freely, which will encourage strong wood development. Consider not only the alignment of existing wood, but where buds and new shoots are directed. One stake on either side of a tree, at an adequate distance to not pierce the rootball, tied loosely to the trunk can allow for adequate movement while providing protection. Stakes can also be used for formal training, such as tying branches horizontally for an espalier. They can also be useful for extra support for fruit loads.



The Dig

Yukon soils tend to be low in organic matter, so digging an extra large hole (eg: 4' across and 2' deep for a 2 gallon pot) is encouraged; consider two or three times the standard recommendation of a hole twice the size of the rootball. The larger area you amend, the more space the roots will have; they are unlikely to extend far beyond the interface with native soils. Remove the soil onto a tarp or into a wheelbarrow and spread bonemeal (a generous dose based on package recommendation) over the bottom of the hole. Cover with two or three inches of soil, work it in and press down very firmly (dancing, perhaps a waltz rather than a pogo, is appropriate for this step) – this will be the layer directly beneath the rootball.

Mix a portion of the removed soil with plenty of organic matter, such as compost, amended with slow-release fertilizers with similar NPK values (we use mostly a 5-3-2 for young trees) – the goal is a uniform texture and colour. If planting after mid-July, use nitrogen-rich fertilizers sparingly or not at all; they can be applied in a top dress in the spring.

Remove your tree from its pot and examine the roots – larger roots that wrap around the outside of the pot can be gently pried out to encourage outward growth. Place your tree in the hole and use a tool handle or other straight edge to assess for depth and level – adjust as needed by packing soil beneath the rootball. This is an opportunity to adjust the angle of the trunk if need be. In sandy soils or dry areas the root collar can be planted a little low so that a moisture catchment area can be maintained around the tree. On heavy clay or damp lowlands plant high and build and mound the soil to ensure the trunk and first roots remain above any pooling water.

Once satisfied with the position of the tree, backfill the hole. Spread roots out to occupy different levels within the soil profile and pack soil firmly with your hand as you go. Water in well (ie: run a hose on low for 10-15 minutes or place a bucket with a crack or hole in the bottom next to the tree and for a slow seep). Creating an ankle high soil berm that can hold about 5 gallons of water around the tree can be helpful to ensure water is getting to where it is needed.

Next spring, work manure, compost and/or granular fertilizers into the top layer of soil all over the planting area and water it in well. A second top dress can be done towards the end of June.

Take-aways

- ✓ Choose sites with good drainage, good sun exposure and protection from strong winds
- ✓ Plants tree 10-50' apart
- ✓ Dig large holes and amend with plenty of organic matter
- ✓ Water, water, water!