

Fruit Trees

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Last year we had 2 periods of freezing weather in San Antonio. The cold spells were severe enough to kill lime trees and defoliate lemons but it there was not enough cold weather overall to provide most peaches, plums, pears, and apples the cold weather they needed to “reload” their chemistry for this year’s blooms and fruit protection. Each variety of the fruit species listed has a different need for cold temperatures for this “reloading”. The amount of cold needed is called the “required chill hours” for the variety. The chill hours are temperatures between 32 degrees and 45 degrees Fahrenheit that the fruit trees receive between approximately November 1 and February 28 each year.

If, like last year, a peach or apple variety did not receive its required chill hours, the trees did not bloom or set fruit. Most also did not releaf until early summer. In my neighborhood and through most of San Antonio, the only varieties of fruit that bloomed normally last spring were those such as the peach, Florida King, that has a “chill” requirement of 350 hours.

This year is different, it is estimated that we have already received over 350 chill hours. That means we can expect most of the fruit varieties that require moderate “chill hours” of 600 hours or less to be ready for action in late February and March.

If you want to be successful with peaches, plums, pears, or apples in the San Antonio area, in addition to selecting low chill varieties, grow them in 8ft. by 8ft. raised beds irrigated with drip irrigation. They require well drained soil and frequent irrigation. Fruit trees are not xeriscape plants. You are also much more likely to be successful with fruit varieties that mature before the end of June. It is very challenging to protect the ripening fruit from pests as you proceed into the summer, not to mention, the need for high amounts of irrigation. Pruning fruit trees is also important. Of the grouping, peaches, apples, plums, and pears, peaches require the most pruning.

For peaches consider the varieties Florida King (350 hours), June Gold (a forgiving 650hours) Tex King (400 hours), Sam Houston (500 hours), or La Feliciana (550 hours). Tex King, Sam Houston, and La Feliciana are Freestones that ripen in June. Peaches do not require a pollinator. Apricots and nectarines are closely related to peaches but are more difficult to grow successfully because of pest issues with nectarines and weather issues with apricots. They are prone to bloom early and be affected by late freezes.

Methley is the most reliable plum for our area. It only requires 250 hours of chill and is a self-pollinator. Bruce (500 hours) is productive if it has a pollinator such as Methley or Santa Rosa (400 hours)

Hard pears such as Kieffer (350 hours) and Orient (350 hours) are very productive and easy to grow. LeConte (300) is a softer pear that is successful in many gardens but has some problem with fire blight.

Apples perform best with a pollinator. The trick is to have two varieties that bloom at the same time. The usual combination is to have an Anna (300 hours) and a Dorsett Golden (300 hours). Ein Sheimer (350 hours) is also planted with Anna.

Other fruits to consider are pomegranates, oriental persimmons, blackberries, loquat, and citrus. Visit plantanswers.com for more information about growing fruit in San Antonio.