

Other Fruit Options

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Last week we discussed chill hours and pears, peaches, apples and plums. They are the species that we initially think of for backyard fruit production in San Antonio, but they are not the easiest fruit to grow. Raised beds, drip irrigation and pesticide sprays are essential for consistent success. Figs, blackberries, pomegranates, and oriental persimmon are desirable fruits for backyard production and require less attention to achieve reasonable production levels.

There are dwarf ornamental figs but the varieties that we consider for fruit production make a large plant. They have human hand- size deciduous leaves, and grow as multistem, round shaped shrubs that are often 12 feet tall and 12 feet in diameter. The fruit can be cherry-sized, all the way up to plum sized. It is produced in June and July. The most desirable varieties have a closed eye that is better at resisting penetration by fruit beetles and other insects than an open-eye fruit. Varieties with closed eyes include Alma, Celeste and Texas Everbearing. Brown Turkey has a leaf like a turkey foot. The fruit has an open eye but is still considered one of the best choices for high quality consistent fruit production.

Figs require generous amounts of water for maximum production but can survive in a xeriscape landscape. Twelve inches of mulch over the root system is not too much. Figs are long-lived, and nematodes can be an issue, stopping fruit production. Nematode infected plants need to be removed. Birds and other wildlife are quick to share your figs, but production is usually high enough to meet everyone's needs.

Plant blackberries as a bare root or in a container. Planted now or later this spring and they will be in production next year. The best varieties seem to be the thorned varieties, Choctaw, Brazos and Rosborough. Varieties without thorns exist, but I have never had good luck with them. The thornless selections do not like our hot dry summers. They produce later than the thorned varieties and then have trouble producing new canes in time for next year's crop.

The toughest thing about growing blackberries is the necessary task of pruning out the old stems(floriganese) to make room for the new stems(primocanes). Wear long sleeves and have a good pair of gloves. The primocanes produce the fruit in the next crop year. Most production occurs in May.

For many years the only pomegranate that we grew in Central Texas was "Wonderful". It produces a baseball size fruit in October on a multi-stem shrub 14 feet tall. In addition to the large sized shrub, "Wonderful" is an inconsistent producer. Now most nurseries offer a large selection of varieties with differences in shrub size, fruit-size and fruit maturity times. Select a variety that meets your landscape needs. One variety that I like is Pink Satin.

Pomegranate fruit used to be grown as much for crafts projects as for the food value but now the juice has gained favor for its superior nutritional value. Another major attraction of using pomegranate in the landscape are the 3 inch multi-petaled orange blooms. They are long lived and decorate the shrub in April and May. In fact, there are nearly as many ornamental selections of pomegranate as crop producing varieties.

Oriental persimmon is another fruit species that is easy to grow without pesticide sprays and has ornamental value in the landscape. The small (up to 25 feet) trees grow relatively slowly. The colorful tennis ball sized fruit is spaced on the well-shaped tree to the degree that it looks as if it was artificially arranged. The oriental persimmon is deciduous with attractive leaves in the fall. The fruit takes some getting used to on most selections, it is astringent until it is mushy ripe. The one exception is Fuyu which is sweet and palatable in a firmer condition.