

Talk to expert before choosing fruit trees

Weather is one of the most important factors determining where certain fruits can be grown and where they cannot. It explains why, for example, people in south Florida can't grow apples or blueberries; and why people living in the northern part of the state can't grow the exotic tropical fruits, such as papaya or mangoes.

Most fruits which grow in the northern part of Florida are deciduous, which means that during the winter the trees lose their leaves and go into a period of dormancy or rest.

During this rest period, the tree must be exposed to chilling temperatures. This exposure to the cold prepares the plant to resume active growth in the spring.

Temperatures below 45°F accumulated throughout the winter determines the total hours of chilling. Species differ in the amount of chilling they need in order to completely rest and resume growth. This is known as a plant's chilling requirement. Lack of sufficient chill hours results in sparse foliage and little to no flower production. If there are no flowers, there will be no fruit.

Our area receives between 400 to 650 hours below 45°F during an average winter. This provides enough chill hours for a few apple varieties such as 'Anna', 'Ein Shemer', 'Dorsett Golden', 'TropicSweet' and Shell. It does not provide the chill hours required for many of the other more common varieties such as Red Delicious and Golden Delicious.

This same environmental factor holds true for most deciduous fruit trees. For example, some of the better known peach varieties, such as Elberta and Bell of Georgia, perform poorly here following most winters. Both require about twice the chill hours as we receive during most winters. There are at least ten peach varieties that perform OK in our area.

Selecting the wrong variety is only one of the disappointments experienced by those wishing to grow fruits in Florida. Even when the correct variety is selected, many fruit enthusiasts are disappointed to see insects eating their fruit, diseases causing their fruit to rot or possibly all their fruit falling to the ground before it is ready to be eaten.

In order to be successful with fruit production in North Florida, a person needs to ask a lot of questions before planting the first plant. Which varieties grow well here? How much care is needed to grow this type of fruit? If you do not know the answers to these questions, talk to a knowledgeable employee at a local, reputable nursery or call your local UF/IFAS County Extension Office before choosing to plant fruit trees this winter.

Larry Williams, UF/IFAS Extension Agent, Okaloosa County, December 20, 2010

