YOUR FREE READER'S COMPANION

The Backyard Fruit Planner

A companion to The Backyard Fruit Growing Bible · by Cal Renner

Thanks for picking up the book. This is the companion you pin to the shed wall and carry out to the yard on planting day: the fruit chooser that tells you what will actually thrive in the space and the patience you have, a chill-hours and zone quick reference so you buy a variety that fruits instead of one that just grows leaves, a planting-depth and soil-pH card with the two rules that quietly kill more plants than any pest, a first-two-years pruning cheat sheet so you stop being afraid of the loppers, and a month-by-month calendar so the year lives in your bones. Print it, fold it, keep it with the trowel.

With a tomato, if you get it wrong the ground forgives you by June. With a tree, "next year" is the tree's whole life. You do not garden the plant, you garden the site - so get the site, the soil, and the planting right the first time, because a perennial gives you no second chances. Read your yard first. Then, and only then, go buy a plant. - Cal Renner

1. The Fruit Chooser - Match It to Your Space and Your Patience

Before you fall in love with a variety in a catalog, run it through the real questions: how long until it feeds me, does it need full sun (it does), does it need a second plant to set fruit, and will it live in a pot if my yard is small? The single biggest driver of whether a beginner succeeds is picking from the easy end of this table and stacking a fast crop next to a slow one, so you are eating from the yard within months while the trees mature in the background.

A note on the columns: "full sun" means six hours of direct summer sun at the honest minimum, six to eight where you actually want to be - measure it in July with the leaves out, not in bare-branch spring. "Self-fertile" means one plant sets fruit alone. "Needs a partner" means you must plant a second, different variety of the same fruit, blooming at the same time, within about 50 to 100 feet, or you get a tree full of flowers and a harvest of nothing.

Fruit	Time to first harvest	Full sun	Self-fertile?	Good in containers?	One-line note
Strawberries	Year 1 (June-bearers, full crop year 2)	6-8 hrs	Self-fertile	Yes - excellent	Fastest fruit there is; set the crown right at the soil line
Blueberries	~3 years	6-8 hrs	Self-fertile (2 varieties crop better and bigger)	Yes - excellent	Demands acid soil pH 4.5-5.5 or it slowly starves
Raspberries	~2 years	6 hrs+ (tolerates a little afternoon shade)	Self-fertile	Poorly - it sprawls and runs	Vigorous; learn primocane vs floricane before you prune
Blackberries	~2 years	6 hrs+	Self-fertile	Poorly - wants a trellis	Thornless types exist; needs room and a wire
Grapes	2-3 years	Full sun, all day	Self-fertile	No - needs an arbor	Prune away most of last year's wood every dormant season
Apples	2-3 yrs (dwarf), 7-10 (standard)	6-8 hrs	Needs a partner	Yes, on dwarf rootstock	Plant two varieties, a crabapple, or one multi-grafted tree
Pears	4-6 years	6-8 hrs	Needs a partner	Dwarf only	Pick them hard and ripen indoors, never on the tree
Peaches / nectarines	3-4 years	Full sun, all day	Self-fertile	Genetic dwarfs, yes	Self-fertile but needy; train to an open center
Plums	3-5 years	6-8 hrs	Usually needs a partner	Dwarf only	European and Japanese types will not pollinate each other

Cherries	3-5 years	6-8 hrs	Sweet: needs a partner. Sour (pie): self-fertile	Poorly	Start with a self-fertile sour cherry; it is the easy one
Figs	1-2 years	6-8 hrs	Self-fertile	Yes - excellent	The most carefree fruit in the book; forgives everything
Dwarf citrus	1-2 years	Bright sun / south window	Self-fertile	Yes - a must in cold zones	A lemon tree you wheel indoors before the first hard freeze

The plain-yard takeaways

- Beginners plant from the easy end first. Strawberries, blueberries, raspberries, blackberries, and figs reward you far more than they ask. A yard planted only from that list almost cannot fail.
- Know what you are signing up for with the needy ones. Peaches, sweet cherries, apples, and pears can be magnificent, but they are a commitment - spray schedules, bird netting, pollination partners - not a plant-and-forget.
- Stack your timeline. Put in a tree for the long game, blueberries for the medium term, and a bed of strawberries for a harvest this very season, all on the same day.
- Plan for the gardener you really are on a busy, rainy weekend - not the ideal one you imagine in January. A thriving easy crop beats a struggling hard one every time.

Sun is the one thing you cannot manufacture in a backyard. You can fix soil, add water, and buffer cold, but you cannot add sunlight. When you are torn between two spots, the sunnier one wins, every time.

2. Chill Hours + Hardiness Zone - The Two Numbers to Check Before You Buy

Two numbers decide whether a fruit will even work where you live, and both get checked before you spend a dollar. Your hardiness zone is the survival filter - it answers "will this live through a normal winter here." Your chill hours are the fruit-set filter - they answer "will this actually crop." Beginners check the first and never hear about the second, then wonder for three years why a healthy tree gives them leaves and no fruit.

Hardiness zone - the survival filter

Your USDA zone is based on one thing only: the average coldest winter night at your location, worked out over about thirty years. Each zone covers a 10 degree F band, split into "a" and "b" halves 5 degrees apart. Zone 6, for example, means your average coldest night lands between minus 10 and zero degrees F. It says nothing about summer heat, humidity, rain, or frost dates. Treat it as a hard floor.

- Look up your zone by ZIP code on the USDA map before you shop.
- Match or beat the rating, with margin. In zone 6, I want plants rated hardy to zone 5 or colder, so a brutal winter does not wipe them out.

Chill hours - the fruit-set filter

Deciduous fruit needs a stretch of cold each winter to break dormancy and set fruit. Chill hours are the cumulative hours below 45 degrees F through the dormant season - they do not have to be consecutive, you are just tallying the total. Too little chill and flowers open weak and uneven and fruit set fails. Plant a very low-chill variety in a cold region and a January warm spell can fool it into blooming early, straight into a killing frost.

Fruit	Typical chill-hour need	Notes
Apples	High - many 700-1,000+; most land 600-800	Low-chill varieties (Anna, Dorset Golden) run 300-500
Pears	High - roughly 600-800+	Similar to apples
Sweet & sour cherries	High - about 700-1,000+	Cold-climate fruit
Peaches / nectarines	Moderate - 300-700	Low-chill types (Red Baron, Tropic Snow) 150-500
Plums	Moderate - roughly 300-700	Japanese types often lower than European
Blueberries	Wide - northern types high, southern (rabbiteye) very low	Match the type to your winter
Figs, pomegranates, dwarf citrus	Low - under ~300, citrus effectively none	The warm-climate and container crowd

How to find your number

- Your local cooperative extension office publishes typical chill figures for your area; many online nursery tools estimate it by ZIP code.
- Once you know you get, say, around 800 chill hours, shop with confidence: a variety needing 600-800 is a safe bet, one demanding 1,200 is asking for trouble.
- The warm-wall trick: a south-facing masonry or brick wall soaks up day heat and releases it at night, and can be worth most of a zone of extra warmth - the spot to try a fig or a peach that is marginal for you.

Match or beat the zone, then match the chill. This one check separates the people who harvest from the people who just grow leaves.

3. Planting Depth + Soil pH - The Card That Saves the Plant

More fruit plants are killed by how they were put in the ground than by any pest, and almost all of it comes down to a few rules that go against what most of us were taught. Get the depth right, do not pamper the hole, and match the pH - especially the one dramatic blueberry exception - and the plant carries itself.

The planting-depth rules

- Graft union stays 1 to 3 inches ABOVE the soil. On a grafted tree you will see a bulge or kink low on the trunk. Bury it and the variety roots above the graft, defeats the dwarfing rootstock, and runs up to a full-size tree - or rots. Keep that union proud of the soil, always.
- Strawberry crown sits right AT the soil line. The crown is the thick point where leaves meet roots. Bury it and it rots; perch it too high and the roots dry out. Roots down and covered, crown exposed at the surface.
- Dig the hole no deeper than the root ball, and two to three times as wide. Loosen the sides so roots can push out. Set the plant at the same depth it grew before.

Do NOT amend the planting hole

This is the rule that trips up experienced gardeners, because the old advice was the opposite. Backfill with the same native soil you dug out - nothing else. Fill the hole with loose peat and compost instead and you create two problems: the roots circle happily inside that cushy pocket and never push out into your real soil, leaving a poorly anchored tree the size of the hole; and the rich pocket acts like a sponge in a bathtub, pulling water in from the surrounding ground and holding it, so you have accidentally built a small bog around the roots. Firm the native soil in, water it well, and stop. Save every bit of organic matter for the top of the ground as mulch - a few inches of wood chips or bark, pulled back a couple of inches off the trunk.

Soil pH targets - and the blueberry exception

pH decides whether the plant can even take up the nutrients already in your soil, so it matters more than fertilizer. Test first through your extension office; do it the season before you plant if a big pH change is needed, because that shift takes months.

Crop	Target soil pH
Apples, pears	~6.0 - 7.0
Peaches, cherries, plums (stone fruit)	~6.5 - 7.0
Strawberries	~5.8 - 6.8
Raspberries, blackberries	~5.5 - 6.5
Blueberries (the exception)	4.5 - 5.5, sweet spot 4.8 - 5.2

Blueberries are the reason this card exists. They are true acid-lovers, and 4.5 to 5.5 is far more acidic than any other common fruit. In ordinary near-neutral garden soil a blueberry cannot pull iron from the

ground, its leaves yellow, and it slowly starves no matter how you feed it - the single most common way people kill blueberries. Acidify their ground ahead of time with elemental sulfur based on your soil test, give them their own dedicated bed or a container where you control the mix, and never plant them among fruit that wants neutral soil. Blueberries get their own home. Design around it.

Native backfill, graft union above the soil, strawberry crown at the line, blueberries in their own acid bed. Four small habits on planting day that the plant lives or dies by for the next twenty years.

4. First-Two-Years Pruning Cheat Sheet - Stop Being Afraid of the Cut

More good trees are ruined by fear of pruning than by any pest. The tree wants to grow; your cuts just tell it where. You almost cannot hurt a tree by pruning it, but you can absolutely hurt it by not pruning it. Here is the whole vocabulary on one page.

Start every plant, every year, with the three Ds

Remove Dead, Diseased, and Damaged wood first - back to healthy wood or to the base. This is first aid, not artistry, and you cannot make a mistake removing wood that is already gone. You will be amazed how much of the job is done before you touch a healthy branch.

The two real cuts

- Thinning cut - removes a whole branch back to its origin (trunk or a bigger limb). Opens the tree to light and air, does NOT trigger regrowth. This is your workhorse cut. Favor it.
- Heading cut - shortens a branch back to a bud. Wakes the buds below into several new shoots and makes the tree bushier. Use sparingly and deliberately - to force low branching or stiffen a floppy young limb. Cut just above an outward-facing bud so growth heads away from the center. Heading everything is the classic beginner mistake; it makes a congested broom of watersprouts.

Pick the shape in year one

Central leader (one dominant trunk, tiered branches)	Open center / vase (no central trunk, 3-5 outward scaffolds)
Apples, pears, sweet cherries, European plums	Peaches, nectarines, apricots, Japanese plums
Protect one central shoot; select well-spaced scaffolds around it	On planting day, head a new stone-fruit whip to knee height above 3-4 buds to force low branching

Timing - and the crops that break the rules

- Apples and pears: prune in the dormant season (winter into early spring). Leafless, you can see the structure, and dormant cuts invigorate.
- Stone fruit (peaches, cherries, apricots, plums): prune in late spring or summer, in dry weather. Fresh cuts in wet dormant cold invite silver leaf and canker.
- Summer cuts calm growth and let light in; use them to hold a vigorous tree's size in check.

Canes and vines - the renewal game

- Primocane = a first-year green cane. Floricane = that same cane in its second year, now woody, when it fruits and then dies.
- Summer-bearing raspberries and blackberries fruit on floricanes - so cut spent canes to the ground

right after harvest, and keep this year's primocanes for next year.

- Everbearing raspberries fruit on primocane tips in fall - simplest method is to mow the whole planting to the ground in late winter for one clean fall crop.
- Grapes: each dormant season cut away the vast majority of last year's growth, keeping only a few renewal canes or short spurs. It always feels like too much. It is not - an unpruned vine is a jungle of leaves and almost no fruit.

Remove the three Ds first. Thin to open, head to build. Central leader for pomes and sweet cherries, open vase for stone fruit. Cut to an outward bud, cut just outside the branch collar, and never paint the wound.

5. Month-by-Month Harvest & Task Calendar

This is the year as a rhythm. Once the calendar lives in your bones you stop reacting to problems and start staying ahead of them. It is written for a temperate climate, roughly zones 5 through 7 - shift every date to your own conditions: earlier in the warm South and West, later in the cold North, anchored to your last spring frost and first fall frost.

Month	Prune / plant	Feed & protect	Harvest
Jan	Dormant pruning of apples & pears; plant bare-root trees	Dormant oil on bark; copper on peaches before buds swell	(Storage apples in the cellar)
Feb	Finish dormant pruning; plant bare-root	Finish dormant sprays before bud swell	-
Mar	Finish planting before leaf-out	Start feeding as growth begins; keep sprays off open blooms	-
Apr	Bloom - watch the frost forecast, cover early bloomers	Kaolin clay at petal fall for plum curculio; protect the bees	First strawberries in warm zones
May	Prune stone fruit if needed (dry weather)	Net cherries & blueberries before they color; renew clay after rain	Early strawberries; spring raspberries begin
Jun	Thin peaches & plums to a hand's width after June drop	Keep watering; keep the orchard floor clean of drops	Strawberries, early cherries, summer raspberries
Jul	Summer-prune vigorous trees to let light in	Water deeply through the heat - a swelling crop is thirsty	Peaches, blueberries, raspberries, early apples, main fig crop
Aug	Cut spent summer-raspberry canes after they finish	Preserve the overflow as it comes; keep watering	Peaches, plums, blackberries, apples, figs - the busiest picking
Sep	Fall planting in mild zones	Ease off watering as trees head toward dormancy	Late apples, pears, grapes, everbearing raspberries
Oct	Begin dormant pruning after leaves drop	Sanitation: rake leaves under apples, pick up every dropped fruit	Storage apples in to the cold; last pears & grapes
Nov	Plant in mild zones; tuck figs & container citrus into winter quarters before hard freeze	Strip every mummy from stone-fruit branches to starve brown rot	Last of the late apples
Dec	Trees asleep; plan next year's additions by the fire	Cellar full of apples, freezer full of summer	-

The single most valuable fall chore

Sanitation. Rake and remove the fallen leaves under apple trees to break the scab cycle, pick up every

dropped fruit, and strip every dried mummy from the stone-fruit branches. You are starving next year's disease over winter with a rake instead of a sprayer. Skip it and you fight scab and brown rot all summer.

6. Your First-Season Starter Plan - Plant This Spring

Do not stare at bare dirt waiting years for a first taste. Here is the stacked planting I steer every beginner toward, so you eat from the yard this season while the slow crops mature behind it.

What	Why it is on the list	First harvest
1 bed of everbearing strawberries (or June-bearers)	Fastest fruit there is, fits anywhere including a pot, teaches you the crown rule	This season
2 blueberry bushes (2 varieties) in their own acid bed or a pair of pots	Near trouble-free once the pH is right, long-lived, cross-pollinate for bigger berries	~Year 3
1 fig in a large pot (or in-ground in a warm zone)	The most carefree fruit in the book, self-fertile, wheels indoors for winter in cold zones	1-2 years
1 dwarf apple (self-fertile pair or a multi-graft) OR 1 self-fertile sour cherry	Your long-game tree; multi-graft solves pollination in a tight yard	2-3 years (dwarf apple)

The planting-day checklist

- [ ] Site chosen first, then the fruit - sunniest spot, six-plus hours measured in summer, cold air draining away downhill.
- [ ] Zone matched with margin, chill hours checked against your local number before buying.
- [ ] Soil tested; blueberries getting their own acid bed at pH 4.5-5.5.
- [ ] Hole no deeper than the root ball, 2-3x as wide, native-soil backfill - nothing added.
- [ ] Graft union 1-3 inches above the soil; strawberry crown at the line.
- [ ] Watered in well, mulched a few inches deep, mulch pulled back off the trunk.
- [ ] First-summer flowers pinched off strawberries (and young trees) so the plant builds roots before it fruits.

That is the planner. The one habit worth more than any tool in the shed: read your yard before you read a catalog, get the site and the soil and the planting right on day one, and then mostly get out of the plant's way. Stack a fast crop next to a slow one so you are never waiting on bare dirt. Everything else - the pruning, the picking, the netting against the birds - you learn as the seasons come round, and it all lives complete in the book. When you carry your first full basket in from the yard, I would love to hear about it, and in a couple of emails I will tell you how a quick word from you helps this book reach the next person standing in a yard wondering where to dig the first hole.

Read the site, feed the soil, plant it right the first time,

Cal Renner