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# Sweet ambition, prickly task

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By Matt Wake (Contact / Staff Bio) June 3, 2008 - 12:00 a.m. EST

CLEMSON — If you want to grow fruit trees in your yard, there are two questions to address. One, how much time and labor can you put into it? And two, are you willing to apply pesticides?

Demurring on either query means your orchard dreams are doomed, according to Clemson University Professor of Horticulture Desmond Layne.

"What I try to tell people it to support the local roadside market and buy fruit from professionals. That way you can have the best fruit, support growers and not have all the headaches," Layne said. "But it is possible to grow fruit trees in your yard in the Upstate."

To raise stone fruits — fruits with pits, like peaches, plums, cherries and apricots — gardeners must become chemical avengers. Leaves, buds and fruits must be sprayed religiously. But if said treatments are made and rain falls the next day, the effort was in vain. Even if chemicals are applied properly, if timing was off it may still be a bust.

"The really good chemicals commercial growers uses are generally not available to the consumer," Layne said. "Spraying can be very labor intensive. If not done properly, disease or insects can actually kill the tree — not just the harvest."

Enemies lie in wait. Brown rot, a fungus spread by bees and other sources, will cause peaches to decay and fall to the ground. Stinkbugs puncture fruit, using their mosquito-esque snoot like a hypodermic needle. Caterpillars, beetles and other critters take their turn too. Critical damage ensues.

## GROUND ZERO

In addition to these perils, the Upstate's hard, red clay is a challenge in itself. The environment requires significant amendments — organic matter, such as compost. Adding lime can help correct soil pH levels. Would-be growers also need to be realistic when selecting what to plant.

"If you've moved down here from New Jersey or Michigan the varieties of apples or pears that grew up there may not work in our climate," Layne said.

A little wisdom goes a long way when trying to grow fruit, particularly in regards to timing and selection.

"Is now a good time to plant a six-foot peach tree? No, it's not," Layne said. "You don't want to buy a tree with leaves and fruit on it. In a little three-gallon pot, that plant hasn't developed the root system to support

## Photo

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Jessica Nelms

Clemson University Professor of Horticulture Desmond Layne checks out a peach tree.

## Up a tree

Although growing fruit trees at home isn't a walk in the park, here are some tips that can help ...

- Select healthy one-year-old trees, about three- to four-feet tall and with a good root system. A small tree with a good root system is more desirable than a large tree with a poor root system.
- Trees that are two years old or older do not usually grow as well as one-year-old trees. Frequently, older trees do not have sufficient buds on the lower portion of the trunk to develop a good framework.
- Do not purchase trees that appear

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fruit and leaves.”

Instead, Layne said to purchase a dormant tree in January and plant at that time. The tree should have no leaves and preferably be dug out of the ground from a [nursery](#).

It sounds dire, but Layne said native plants, like blueberries, paw paws and muscadine grapes, are definitely more do-able.

“Those fruit crops have been growing here for a century and they’ve adapted to diseases really well,” Layne said. “Other fruit are really exotic plants to our native environment. Apples are from Kazakhstan and peaches come from China. The don’t have ways to defend against the diseases here.”

**RIPE ANSWERS**

In 1999, Clemson Extension launched a Web site designed to counsel home growers, [hgic.clemson.edu](http://hgic.clemson.edu). Usage has gone through the roof. Last year the Home & [Garden](#) Information Center (HGIC) site registered 6.5 million visitors and 22 million hits.

Constantly updated, the database holds over 600 facts sheets, easily searchable. Tulips to tomatoes. Peaches to pumpkins.

“If it’s on there you can find what you need really quick: how to grow it; how to cook it,” Layne said. “It’s practical info, like what to expect at the beginning of the seasons, the middle and the end.”

Clemson Extension also broadcasts juju via TV appearances, the “Your Day” radio program and even over the phone. Would-be green thumbs away from their computers can call up (888) 656-9988 and listen to taped [gardening tips](#) 24/7.

“If people want to grow fruit, they should get good advice,” Layne said. “We can help them with that. If all you do is go to a big box store and buy a tree in a pot with a label that says ‘peach’ and try to plant it, then you’re going to fail.”

stunted, poorly grown, diseased or insect-injured.

- Check the trees closely to make sure that you are getting the cultivar and rootstock that you desire.
- Peach flowers are self-fruitful. Therefore, it is not necessary to plant more than one peach variety in the backyard.
- Sunlight, and plenty of it, is the key to maximizing fruit production. Pick an area where the trees will be in the sun most or all of the day. The early morning sun is particularly important because it dries the dew from trees, thereby reducing the incidence of diseases.

Check [hgic.clemson.edu](http://hgic.clemson.edu) for more information including recommended varieties, rootstocks and chilling requirements.

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