



Growing Peaches

Peaches and nectarines are desirable garden crops that unfortunately are only marginally adapted to the most ideal sites in extreme southern New Hampshire. The peach tree and its buds are extremely tender. Temperatures of -15°F will generally destroy most peach flower buds. In some situations buds will be destroyed by low temperatures of 0 to -5°F . This usually occurs when a rapid temperature drop follows a period of mild weather. Select peach planting sites that offer protection from spring frosts and severe winter cold.

Purchasing Trees

Purchase trees (dormant trees preferred) from a reputable garden dealer or nursery. Order medium-sized trees (9/16 – 11/16 inches in diameter) for best results. Most peach varieties are self-fruitful so pollination is not usually a problem.

Soil and Site

Peach trees will do reasonably well in a wide range of soil types, although they will not tolerate poorly drained soils with a high water table. Peach trees require full sunlight all day and should not be planted in the shade of a building or large tree.

Proper soil preparation is an important first step. Test the soil and apply lime as recommended to raise the pH to 6.5. Eradicate perennial weeds, particularly quackgrass.

All fruit trees including peaches should be planted in early spring as soon as the soil is dry enough to work (mid-April to May). If the planting site is not ready when the trees arrive from the nursery, unwrap the trees and “heel-in” the roots in moist soil in a shady spot. Plant trees before their buds break. Space peach and nectarine trees 12 to 15 feet apart in the home orchard.

Planting the Tree

- 1) Dig a hole large enough to allow the roots to be spread out completely. This usually requires a hole that is much wider than it is deep.
- 2) Backfill the planting hole with topsoil. Do not use sod to fill the hole.
- 3) If you purchase a “dwarf” peach tree, plant the tree with the graft union 2 to 3 inches above the soil surface. The graft union is the point where the variety was grafted onto the rootstock.
- 4) Firmly pack the soil around the roots. Backfill the hole 2/3 full, soak in 2 gallons of water, and finish backfilling. If you leave a depression or water catching basin around the tree, be sure to fill it in by fall to reduce the danger of ice damage to the lower trunk.
- 5) Remove any tags or labels attached to the trees to prevent girdling of the trunks.
- 6) Do not add fertilizer to the planting hole. Trees can be fertilized after rain has thoroughly settled the soil around the roots, about 3 weeks after planting. Apply 1/2 pound of 10-10-10 by spreading it lightly in a wide circle 16 to 20 inches from the tree trunk.

Pruning

Peach and nectarine trees are pruned and trained to develop and maintain tree size and shape. They are generally trained into an open-center system with 2 to 3 major (scaffold) limbs forming an open center or vase shape. Peach and nectarine trees are usually pruned in late April to allow an accurate assessment of flower bud survival before pruning.

Pruning at Planting

Head peach trees back to 24 to 30 inches at planting. Limbs arising below the heading-back cut should be cut in half to promote the development of strong, wide-angled scaffolds and thinned to leave only the best 3 or 4. Remove any limbs growing 15 inches or less from the ground.

Pruning Young, Non-Bearing Trees

In spring the year after planting, select 2 to 3 well-developed, wide-angled scaffold limbs and cut off all other limbs flush with the trunk. Head remaining scaffolds back slightly where growth has exceeded 30 inches.

From the second to the fourth years, remove any branches that grow straight up through or toward the center of the tree. Prune lightly to eliminate overlapping and damaged limbs.

Pruning Bearing Trees

Peach trees bear fruit on shoots that grew the previous year. These 1-year shoots usually have three buds at each node. The smaller, center bud is a leaf bud and each of the two larger, outer buds is a flower bud. Thus, a major objective in pruning (and fertilizing) bearing peach trees is to stimulate new shoot growth.

Maintain tree height at 9 to 10 feet by heading back scaffold branches to an outward growing lateral. Remove weak or diseased branches as well as those that grow up, through or across the center of the tree or downward. The remaining vigorous branches may need to be thinned out to prevent crowding. Head back long, thin branches to stiffen them.

Fertilizing

Manage peach trees to ensure production of 10 to 12 inches of new growth each season. This is accomplished through pruning and fertilization as needed. For most home gardens, an application of 1 pound of a complete garden fertilizer (such as 10-10-10) to non-bearing trees and 2 pounds to mature bearing trees is sufficient. Adjust rates according to tree vigor. Fertilizer should be applied in the spring before growth starts.

Peach Thinning

Peach trees must be thinned in years when they bear a heavy crop. A properly thinned tree will have about the same volume of fruit as an unthinned tree, but fruit size and quality will be much better. Hand-thin peaches in mid-June to a spacing of one peach to every 6 to 8 inches of twig.

Peach and Nectarine Varieties for New Hampshire

<i>Harbinger</i>	Good quality, early peach (July in Durham).
<i>Reliance</i>	Developed at UNH. Most winter-hardy peach variety; has cropped after -25°F. Medium-sized fruit of fair quality. Thinning a must.
<i>Redhaven</i>	Excellent fruit quality, flavor and appearance. The standard of peach quality.
<i>Canadian Harmony</i>	Large, flavorful peach; ripens around August 25 in Durham.
<i>Mericrest</i>	Nectarine from UNH. Excellent flavor and good disease resistance. Very hardy.
<i>Hardired</i>	Hardy nectarine, good quality. Tolerant of bacterial spot and brown rot.

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