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# How to Grow Plums: The Complete Guide



Photo Credit: Pixabay

Botanical Name:	<i>Prunus</i> <i>spp.</i>
Plant Type:	Fruit
Season:	Full Sun

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# Planting, Growing, and Harvesting Plums

By [Catherine Boeckmann](#)  
**Last Updated:** August 1, 2024



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Ever thought about growing juicy plums?  
Not only are they prolific producers, but  
plum trees also add beauty to your back-  
yard if grown in the right spot. Here's how  
to plant, grow, and harvest plums.

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Plums (*Prunus domestica*, Rosaceae) be-  
long to the rose family along with cher-  
ries, [peaches](#), nectarines, and apricots.  
They are a type of [stone fruit](#) which grows  
on trees in clusters, usually harvested for  
a short period in late summer or  
early fall.

These round, small fruits are usually red-  
dish-purple in color and have smooth skin  
when ripe. Their flesh can be orange, red,

taste—some are sweet while others are tart.

There are so many ways to enjoy this juicy fruit from baking (pies, cakes, muffins) to jam-making. We also enjoy plum sauces served with pork and chicken. Or, enjoy the fruit raw like an apple and add plum slices to cereals, yogurts, and even salad.

#### ADVERTISEMENT

Plus are also nutritious as a good source of vitamin C and antioxidants.

## Choosing a Plum Tree

**hybrids.**

- The hardy European types do well in most regions across the U.S., and are generally self-fertile. If you have space for only one tree, go with a European plum. (However, even self-fertile trees will produce better if cross-pollinated with a second tree.)
- The Japanese types flourish where peach trees thrive (warmer regions, generally). The Japanese plums' early blooms make them more susceptible to spring frosts in colder areas. They need to cross-pollinate with a second variety.
- American hybrids are typically the hardiest of the plums, with some varieties surviving as far north as Zone 3. They need to cross-pollinate with a second variety.

Order bare-root, rather than container-grown trees, if possible. Bare-root plants usually establish better. A well-established tree will yield up to 2 bushels of

- [Stone Fruit: How to Grow Your Own](#)
- [Unusual Fruit and Fruit Trees to Grow](#)
- [How to Grow Cherries: The Complete Guide](#)

## PLANTING

### When to Plant Plum Trees

Plant plum trees in early spring, as soon as the frost in the ground has thawed. If the soil is very waterlogged, it is best to wait until it drains.

### Selecting a Planting Site

Plums should really only be planted in a prime location featuring all of the following characteristics. Otherwise, they may not perform well.

- Plant plum trees in loamy, well-drained soil. Plums do not do well when planted in clay-heavy soils or in locations where their roots will be constantly wet.

sunlight at the very least.

- Avoid planting in low areas where frost may settle, as the frost can damage your trees. Because they flower so early, plums are especially vulnerable to spring frosts, which can damage blooms and result in sub-par fruiting.
- Find a sheltered location, such as a south- or west-facing spot out of the wind if possible. This will help the plum tree set fruit.

## How to Plant a Plum Tree

- Space standard-size trees 20 to 25 feet apart and dwarf trees 10 to 15 feet apart.
- Set bare-root trees atop a small mound of soil in the center of the planting hole, and spread the roots down and away without unduly bending them.
- To prepare a container-grown tree for planting, remove the tree from its pot and get rid of any tightly circling roots by laying the root ball on its side and using shears to trim off these roots. Do

it by scraping up and down the sides with a knife or hand fork.

- When planting grafted trees, it's important to keep the graft union 1 to 2 inches above the soil line. This is especially true for dwarf varieties, as roots may start to grow from above the graft if the tree is planted too deep, bypassing the rootstock that keeps the tree dwarf-size.
- Dig a hole that's a few inches deeper and wider than the spread of the roots.
  - For bare-root trees, set the tree on top of a small mound of soil in the middle of the hole and spread the roots away from the trunk without excessively bending them.
  - For container-grown trees, simply place the root ball in the middle of the hole.
  - Fill in the hole, stopping periodically to make sure that the roots are thoroughly covered and no air pockets remain around the tree.
- Water the tree thoroughly at the time of planting; this helps the soil to settle



watered for the first few weeks after planting.

- For bare-root trees, it's often recommended to stake the tree for at least one year, until the tree is stable enough to stand on its own.

**See our lovely video showing how to plant a plum tree and find detailed information below.**

... Farmer's Almanac - Plant a plum



## **GROWING**

### **How to Care for Plum Trees**

#### **Watering**

- Be sure to water the young trees heavily every week during the first growing season to help promote growth. Then

the soil dry out (though not completely) and water again.

- If rain is lacking, water your tree well into mid-October to give it plenty of moisture through the winter months.

## Fertilizing

- Do not fertilize young fruit trees until they have set a crop.
- Once established, fruit production requires regular fertilizing all year long. If there's good fruit set, fertilize with one pound of calcium nitrate per tree or 1½ lb. 10-10-10. Cut back the nitrogen in fall and winter to avoid encouraging new growth in those seasons.

## General Care

- Are you having pest issues? Talk to your local [cooperative extension](#) for natural solutions that work in your area.
- To help control [pests and diseases](#), remember to prune your trees to keep

mulch in the late fall so that no pests use it over the winter. You can also lightly cultivate the soil around your trees in late spring to eliminate any pests in the soil.

- In the fall, rake away all debris and fallen trees.
- To prevent winter injury: Consider a tree wrap or guard around the lower trunk, especially for a young plum tree.
- Keep an eye on the lower bark and branches for mouse or rabbit damage; if this could be a problem, you may need to install tree guards or fence in young trees with chicken wire for the winter.



## How to Prune Plum Trees

#### ADVERTISEMENT

- Prune in early spring or mid-summer to avoid infection. The best time for pruning is usually spring for young trees and mid-summer for established ones.
- Do NOT prune in the fall. Winter injury and infection may occur.

### **Thinning Fruit**

“Thinning” is the process of removing developing fruit from a tree in order to increase the overall quality of the produced fruit and to prevent damage to the tree.

- Thinning is usually done about a

- Leave 2-4 inches between each fruit, removing those in between.
- Thinning helps to prevent branches from breaking under the weight of the fruit. If branches do break, prune them back to undamaged wood, ideally cutting back to a natural fork to avoid leaving stubs.

### **Pruning: Japanese Plum Trees**

#### ADVERTISEMENT

- If you have a Japanese variety, the best pruning method is to create an “open center” shape, where the central trunk is cut short and several large branches radiate outwards from its tip. In the

tree by two or three buds. After about a month, check the tree. As soon as you have three wide-angled branches, spaced equally apart, cut back any other branches so that these three are the main branches. In the early summer of the second year, cut back the branches in the middle of the tree to short stubs and prune any shoots developing below the three main branches. After the third year, remove any shoots in the center of the tree to keep its shape.

- Japanese types require heavy pruning to help keep them in shape and to produce better fruit. It is also good to thin out the fruit on these types of trees. You should space the plums about 3 to 4 inches apart on each branch.

### **Pruning: European Plum Trees**

- If you have a European variety, the best pruning method is to create a central leader. This shape features a central trunk with branches that spiral

begins in the early summer of the first year, during which time you should remove any shoots that form within 18 inches of the ground. The end result should resemble a Christmas tree.

- European types do not typically require fruit thinning because they do not produce as much fruit as Japanese types. However, the fruit on these types should be spaced about 2 inches apart on each branch.

For more pruning tips, check our [spring pruning guide](#).

## Types

- For a **European** type, try the ‘**Stanley**’. This semi-freestone type works great for the eastern, midwestern, and some of the northwest regions of the U.S. It is self-fertile, meaning no cross-pollination is necessary. It’s harvested in late August, producing medium to large plums with dark blue skin and greenish-yellow flesh and is great for cooking, canning, or eating fresh.

This kind is good for eating fresh and canning because of its sweet taste.

- **American hybrid** trees, such as **'Alderman'**, **'Superior'**, and **'Underwood'**, are all popular choices.

These trees combine the taste of the Japanese variety with the hardiness of the European variety. These types work well for regional extremes.

## HARVESTING

### When to Harvest Plums

- Plums are ready to be harvested from late summer into fall, depending on your area.
- **European plums** have the best flavor when left to ripen on the tree. You can tell when plums are ripe by applying gentle pressure with your fingers. If the skin of the fruit feels soft, then it is ready to be picked. Plums should come off the tree easily with just a slight twist of the fruit.
- **Japanese plums** are picked slightly earlier; allow them to ripen in a



- Plums will not sweeten much after harvest, so be sure to pick them when they're mature. (Try one before you pick them all!)

## How to Store Plums

- Unfortunately, the fruit does not store for long, so must be eaten or pre-served. Alternatively, you can pick the fruits when they are still slightly firm and store them in a cool place to fully ripen.
- The best place to store plums is in the refrigerator. The best temperature for storing plums is about 31° to 32°F with relative humidity around 90–95%; if kept at this temperature, plums may last for 2 to 4 weeks.

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## PESTS/DISEASES

- Silver leaf disease
- Honey fungus
- Bacterial canker
- Pocket plum
- Japanese beetles
- Plum aphids
- Plum moth

Contact your local cooperative extension to implement a spraying program that can help manage these pests and diseases.

## WIT AND WISDOM

*“The children were nestled all snug in their beds,*

*While visions of sugar-plums danced in their heads.”*

–Clement Clarke Moore, “A Visit from St. Nicholas” (a.k.a “ ‘Twas the Night Before

## RECIPES

**DARK PLUM DUFF**

**SECOND SUMMER APPLESAUCE**

**PLUM CROSTATA**

**CHRISTMAS PLUM PUDDING**

## COOKING NOTES

- Plums are great for making [jams or jellies](#).
- Plums can also be stored through freezing or drying them (dried plums are prunes), learn [how to dry fruit with a dehydrator](#).

**FRUIT**

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

### Catherine Boeckmann



Catherine Boeckmann loves nature, stargazing, and gardening so it's not surprising that she and The Old Farmer's Almanac found each other. She leads digital content for the Almanac website, and is also a certified master gardener in the state of Indiana. [Read More from Catherine Boeckmann](#)

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## COMMENTS

**ADD A COMMENT**

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**S Mangan (not verified)** 10 months 3 weeks ago

This article does not describe how to prune or when to pick American Hybrid varieties. Which is what I have.

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**REPLY**

**The Editors** 10 months 3 weeks ago

Hi S,

You should plan to prune your plum trees in late winter/early spring, after the coldest part of the winter has passed, but before buds break and new growth occurs. When pruning is done during the summer or fall, it can reduce dormancy and can potentially cause damage to your plum trees, especially when there is an early winter

When pruning, start by removing and dead, damaged, or diseased branches. Then remove branches to allow for more light to penetrate, increase fruit quality, and encourage new branch development. You should also prune off suckers coming from the root-stock and vegetative water sprouts growing straight up from main branches.

Harvesting plums will take place in summer into fall (depending on your growing area). You should allow the plums to ripen on the tree as they will not gain sweetness once picked. One indicator is if you press on the skin and it is slightly soft to the touch. If you are unsure, pick one and try it to see what if the taste is to your liking.

Hope this helps!

**REPLY**

---

I don't know the type of plum tree i have, but it's rather large and produces a lot of plums. We have this black fungus that keeps growing on the branches every year. We have tried neem oil and neem pesticide, which have not worked.

**REPLY**

---

**Scott (not verified)** 4 years ago

I purchased a Hollywood variety for my Seattle area home, and now realize I need a 2nd variety for x-pollination. The next closest location for the 2nd tree would be about 100' away. Is that too far for an effective x-pollination sibling?

Thanks

**REPLY**

**The Editors** 4 years ago

The recommended maximum distance between plum trees is 50 feet, but as long as there are plenty



up with fewer plums than ideal—but  
that's better than no plums!

**REPLY**

---

**Pam Wells (not verified)** 4 years 8 months  
ago

My Stanley Plum Tree dropped over half its un-  
ripened fruit in early July and then dropped  
more in August. It does not appear diseased. Is  
that a sign of lack of fertilizer or hot weather?  
Or some other reason?

**REPLY**

**David LeNoir (not verified)** 1 week  
ago

I have been having this same problem  
for the last few years. I have tried wa-  
tering, 10-10-10 and citrus fertilizer  
to no avail.

My trees are loaded and when the  
fruit is about half size they begin fall-  
ing off.

two peach trees.

Any ideas of what I should do.

**REPLY**

**Hans Luckey (not verified)** 3 years

4 months ago

Best time to plant

**REPLY**

**The Editors** 4 years 8 months ago

That's unfortunate. It's unlikely to be too much or too little fertilizer.

Premature fruit drop is common among fruit trees; it's Mother Nature's way of reducing the load—especially if you do not thin the fruit load yourself (prune when plums are about 3/4-inch long, leaving 4 to 6 inches between remaining fruits). Weather could be a factor; high heat in early spring can stress the tree, and if conditions in general have been

[REPLY](#)

**Teresa (not verified)** 4 years 8 months ago

I'm in zone 4 and two years ago bought a home with two plum trees on the property. They are quite large, have lovely, fragrant blooms in early spring, but have produced no fruit at all. What could be wrong? The trees are healthy looking with no sign of pests or disease. Help?

[REPLY](#)[MORE COMMENTS](#)

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