

Gardennote

Guide to tropical edible fruits for home gardens in cooler regions of Western Australia

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This Gardennote discusses tropical fruits that can be grown fairly successfully in relatively frost free coastal areas from Geraldton to Esperance. These plants originated from warm to hot areas and require few or nil chilling hours to stimulate flowering and fruit production. Many tropical plants, especially bananas, fruit salad plant and papaws, also give an attractive appearance to a garden. The ice-cream bean, macadamia and mango trees can supply useful shade.

How to grow

Soils should preferably be well-drained with a slightly acidic to neutral pH. Most tropical plants need regular supplies of water, especially avocados and bananas. Avocados also need good quality water (less than 500 ppm of total soluble salts). Plants generally need fertilising every six weeks in the warmer months with a NPK fertiliser that contains magnesium and up to six trace elements.

October is the ideal month for planting. In general, grow plants of named varieties that have been propagated by cuttings, budding and grafting, and not grown from seed. Select an area that is protected from wind and is preferably facing north, with full sun for most of the day. Incorporate as much organic material as possible into the soil and mulch with any well decayed compost and/or animal manure. Most fruit trees can be planted 2–4 m apart. Do not place mulch around the stem or soil next to the stem above the original planting depth.

The young trees of some plants such as avocados, macadamias and mangoes need to be protected from frost with 50% density shade-cloth for up to three years after planting, but will survive slight frosts when established. Some plants such as avocados and mangoes may show marginal leaf scorch due to salinity and damage from hot winds. Hot easterly winds in late spring can result in considerable loss of young fruits, especially with avocados, lychees and mangoes. To prevent sunburn, the stems of some fruit trees (especially mangoes) may need to be painted with a white water based paint and bags may need to be applied over the fruits (avocados, mangoes, papaws and pineapples).



Ice-cream bean pods at Trigg ready for picking in June

Regular pruning is required with bananas, coffee and passion fruit. Plants such as avocados, custard apples and white sapotes can be pruned so they do not grow too large.

A very small proportion of people may experience allergies from eating and/or handling some tropical fruit crops, such as avocados, bananas, fruit salad plant, guavas, mangoes and papaws.

Pests

Most tropical fruit trees are not significantly affected by pests and diseases.

Mediterranean fruit fly larvae can damage the fruit of some plants especially custard apples, guavas, passion fruit, sapodillas and white sapotes. The fruit can be protected from fruit fly attack (plus birds and sun damage) by covering with white calico bags a few weeks before ripening, or by spraying with a registered pesticide.

Sucking insects such as aphids, mealy bug and scales can attack some fruit trees, but at a lower level than temperate fruit crops.

The root-knot nematode can damage the roots of most fruit trees, especially with bananas, papaws and passion fruit and can be seen as swellings on the roots. Damage

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can be reduced by adding molasses (500 g per square metre) and organic matter to the soil.

Rats can attack avocados, bananas, macadamias and mangoes. They can be controlled with baits (check with your local hardware store, nursery or chemical retailer).

Birds, such as 'Twenty-eight' parrots (passion fruit flowers, mango shoots) and black cockatoos (macadamia fruits, mango shoots) and silvereyes (guava fruits), can damage some crops. Netting can be obtained from hardware stores to prevent bird damage on small to medium plants.



Avocado variety 'Fuerte' at Carmel ready to harvest in September

Avocados (*Persea americana*)

Avocado trees can grow into medium trees. Fruit mature from May to February, which is dependent on the variety and the area. Mature fruit ripen after they are removed from the tree.

The late variety, Hass yields well, without cross pollination from other varieties. However, for better pollination and spread of harvesting, interplant Hass, or the mid season variety Wurtz (suitable smaller tree for a home garden) with the early variety Bacon, or the mid season varieties Fuerte and Sharwil.

Roots can be damaged by jarrah dieback (*Phytophthora cinnamoni*) and affected trees need to be injected or sprayed (young trees) with phosphorous acid. Fruits may be damaged by anthracnose, which is controlled with copper sprays.

Bananas (*Musa spp*)

The traditional variety is Williams or Tall Cavendish. Goldfinger is a new variety that grows well in cooler areas. Plantains produce fruit with inferior quality.

Plant suckers, 40–70 cm high. The first bunch should be harvested in less than 27 months and thereafter bunches should be harvested from adjacent stems, at any time in the year, about every 18 months.

The number of plants that are growing in a clump must be closely controlled. With established clumps, suckers will emerge at the base of the main plant. These should be selected so there is one 'stem' that is about 1–2 m high and one small 'peeper' that is less than 20 cm high, besides the main 'stem' that is bearing a bunch. Remove surplus suckers.

A bunch of bananas consists of 7 to 10 'upturned hands', each of which has about 14 'fingers' or bananas. The fruit is ready for harvesting about six to nine months after flower emergence. For protection from sunburn and physical damage, place coloured, bottomless polythene bags over the bunches.

If bananas are allowed to mature on the plant, they may ripen all at once to the yellow, edible stage. To extend the consumption time, a hand of green bananas can be removed every few days for about six weeks before fruits turn yellow on the palm. These will mature in a pantry. Commence harvesting as soon as the bananas lose their angular sides, start to fill and become more rounded.



Banana variety 'Goldfinger' at Trigg ready to harvest in March

Custard Apples (Atemoyas)-*Annona cherimoya* x *Annona squamosa*

There are many types of custard apples within the *Annona* genus. The atemoya type, variety African Pride, produces the best fruit. It is a large bush which produces segmented fruit that ripens in spring. They have an attractive creamy taste. Yields are light and the flowers need hand pollination to give the best results.



Young atemoya fruits at Trigg in March

Macadamia (*Macadamia integrifolia* and *Macadamia tetraphylla*)

The smooth leaf and rough leaf types of macadamia are natives of Queensland and northern NSW. These attractive medium trees grow well with few problems. Varieties such as 344, 741, 816, 842 and A38 should be inter-planted for better pollination. Nuts are ready to harvest from April to September and can be picked from the tree or from the ground.



Macadamia nuts, A38 variety at Harvey in September



Mangoes at Mt Lawley ready for picking in February

Mango (*Mangifera indica*)

See Farmnote 151-'Growing Mangoes in Cooler Climates'. Trees are slow growing and of medium size when mature. They should commence to bear four to five years after planting. Kensington Pride is the main variety and ripens in March, whilst R2E2 is one to two weeks later with slightly larger fruit. Kensington Pride is unusual because it can be produced 'true-to type' from seed.

The main problem is from the fungal disease, anthracnose which attacks all parts of the plant. Control with cupric hydroxide or mancozeb.

Papaw (*Carica papaya*)

The papaw plant has a strong, stem up to 5 m high, with large leaves. Papaws are usually unbranched, so they require less space than most fruit trees. They also have a short life (five years), so they can be grown close to other establishing fruit trees.



Young papaw fruits at Trigg in March

