
Growing Peaches and Nectarines in the Home Garden

Peaches and nectarines are generally adapted only to good sites in extreme southern New Hampshire. The peach tree and its buds are extremely tender. Temperatures of -12 to -14°F will generally destroy most peach flower buds. A sudden cold snap following a period of mild weather may cause damage in some years. Select peach-planting sites that offer protection from spring frosts and severe winter cold. Generally, these sites are elevated relative to the surrounding land.

Purchasing trees

Purchase trees from a reputable garden dealer or nursery. Most peach varieties are self-fruitful and pollination of flowers isn't usually a problem. Dwarf peach trees aren't recommended as dwarfing rootstocks for peaches are not reliably hardy in New Hampshire.

Soil and site

Peach trees will do reasonably well in a wide range of soil types, although they won't tolerate poorly drained soils with a high water table. Peach trees will do best on a site that offers full sunlight all day and shouldn't be planted in the shade of a building or large tree.

Proper soil preparation is an important first step. Soil testing and appropriate recommendations for addressing soil pH and fertility needs are available through your county office of UNH Cooperative Extension. For best results eradicate perennial weeds, particularly quackgrass, before planting.

Plant peach trees in early spring as soon as the soil is dry enough to work (mid-April through May). If the planting site isn't ready when 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. Plant peach and nectarine trees 12 to 15 feet apart.

Planting the tree

- 1) Dig a hole large enough to allow the roots to be spread out completely. This usually requires a hole that's wider than it is deep.
- 2) Backfill the planting hole with topsoil. Don't 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) Firm soil around the roots. Backfill the hole two-thirds full, soak in two 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 autumn 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) Don't add fertilizer to the planting hole. Trees can be fertilized after rain has thoroughly settled the soil around the roots, about three weeks after planting. Apply half a pound of 10-10-10 or its equivalent by spreading it lightly in a wide circle 16 to 20 inches from the tree trunk.

Pruning

Prune and train peach and nectarine trees to develop and maintain tree size and shape. Generally, train them into an open-center system with two or three 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



Figure 2. Young peach tree before pruning.

Head peach trees back to 24 to 30 inches at planting. Cut in half those limbs arising below the heading-back cut to promote the development of strong, wide-angled scaffolds, and thin, leaving only the best three or four. Remove any limbs growing 15 inches or less from the ground.



Figure 1. Newly planted tree pruned to an open center.



Figure 3. Same tree as shown in Figure 2 after pruning.

Pruning young, non-bearing trees

In spring the year after planting, select two or three well-developed, wide-angled scaffold limbs and cut off all other limbs flush with the trunk. Head back the remaining scaffolds 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 nine to 10 feet by heading back scaffold branches to an outward-growing lateral. Remove weak or diseased branches, as well as those that grow downward or up, through, or across the center of the tree. The remaining vigorous branches may need to be thinned 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 half a pound of a complete garden fertilizer (such as 10-10-10) to non-bearing trees and one pound to mature bearing trees is sufficient. Adjust rates according to tree vigor. If trees are growing too vigorously, don't fertilize. If trees aren't growing well, double the fertilizer rate. Apply fertilizer in May.

Fruit thinning

Peaches must be thinned in years when trees set a heavy crop. Hand-thin peaches in mid-June to an average spacing of one peach to every six to eight inches of twig.



Figure 4. Peach buds at node on first-year wood. Center bud is vegetative, side buds are flower buds.



Figure 5. White-fleshed peaches harvested at UNH Horticulture Farm. Photo: W. G. Lord

Peach and nectarine varieties for New Hampshire

Reliance peach and Merricrest nectarine are the most hardy varieties available to New Hampshire gardeners; these should be considered for marginal sites. Both were developed at UNH.

Red Haven is the hardiest high-quality peach variety. Other varieties that do well on better sites in southern New Hampshire include Canadian Harmony and Madison. White-fleshed peaches to try include Raritan Rose and Blushing Star. Nectarines to try include Eastern Glo and Fantasia.



Figure 6: Cut peach flower bud in photo on left has survived winter's cold. Photo: W. G. Lord
The cut bud in the right photo has died due to cold winter temperatures. Photo: W. G. Lord

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