



NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

Peaches and Nectarines: Sun-Kissed Cousins (January 18, 2025)

By Susan Franciskovich, Tulare/Kings Counties Master Gardener

Peaches and nectarines are both part of the species *Prunus persica*, which is a deciduous tree that was first cultivated in eastern China as early as 6,000 BC. *Prunus persica* was introduced to California in the 1700s by Spanish Padres. It bears edible juicy fruits with various characteristics; most are called peaches, and others (the glossy-skinned, non-fuzzy varieties) are called nectarines. Specifically, about the differences between the "sun-kissed" cousins, the skin of nectarines lacks the fuzz (fruit-skin trichomes) that peach skin has.



Peaches and nectarines are divided into two broad classes: "cling," in which the stone is difficult to detach, and "freestone," in which the stone comes loose easily from the flesh. In general, cling peaches are used for processing, while freestone peaches are more suitable for eating fresh.



Peaches are very popular trees and grow successfully in many areas of California. They flourish in the Central Valley because of our Mediterranean climate and deep alluvial soils. Peaches are well-adapted to almost every climate zone in California. They require around 600-900 hours of chilling, although there are low-chill varieties for southern California. (Chill hours are the number of hours a fruit tree spends in temperatures between 32 and 45 degrees F during its dormant period).

California is the top peach producer in the USA (2023). China, followed by the European Union, leads in global peach production. Overall, production acreage has declined in the 21st century in California for both peaches and nectarines. Production and processing costs are relatively high, particularly labor costs, as thinning, pruning, and often harvesting are done by hand.

Peach trees grow up to 23' tall and wide but can be properly pruned to 10-13' tall and wide. The flowers appear in early spring before the leaves. This season's peach crop grows on last year's wood, so proper pruning is a must. Peaches like full sun and require adequate summer watering, good soil drainage, and high nitrogen fertility. For maintenance, spring fruit thinning and control sprays to prevent peach leaf curl and brown rot are required. Peaches require pruning in both winter and summer. This is a critical step because it is easy to overcrop an unpruned tree.

Now, A closer look at peach growing basics. Plant a peach tree (bare root or potted) in early spring or late winter while the tree is dormant. Choose a location with full sun and good drainage. Dig a hole that's twice as wide and just as deep as the tree's root roots or root ball. Leave between 10 and 20 ft. between trees if you are planting more than one tree. Water the tree thoroughly after planting and continue to water weekly during the first growing season, about an inch of water per week. Basically, stone fruits do best with more water.

In the **dormant season**, just prior to bud break, if aphids, mites, or San Jose scale are a problem, spray the tree with a dormant oil. For peach leaf curl (a fungal disease that causes distortion, thickening, and reddening of leaves in spring), spray twice: December 1 and February 1. For more information, visit <https://ipm.ucanr.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/index.html> and click on "Peach Leaf Curl." Although gardeners won't notice the symptoms until spring, there is little that can be done at that time to reduce peachleaf curl. By

the end of the winter dormant season, prune out any dead, diseased, or broken branches. Prune out 50% of last year's wood to thin the crop and ensure good shoot growth.

In the **spring bloom season**, apply a fungicide during bloom to prevent brown rot, which may require 1-3 sprays. Rainy periods require more spray. Lightly fertilize young trees monthly with ¼ pound of high-nitrogen fertilizer such as ammonium sulfate during the summer months. Begin to fertilize mature trees as they start to push out foliage in the spring. For older trees, ammonia sulfate works well at 3 to 4 pounds per tree. Divide the total amount of fertilizer into two and apply in April and early August. In a year with prolonged spring rains, apply a fungicide to prevent brown rot or shot hole fungus. When the fruit is marble-sized, it is thin to about 6 inches apart.

In the **summer growing season**, water about every two to three weeks, and provide enough water to wet the soil to a depth of 18-24 inches. In late June or early July, remove any strong, vigorous shoots from the inner canopy that are blocking light penetration and air circulation. Harvest fruit as soon as it is firmly ripe. Clean up fallen fruit immediately to minimize brown rot or infestations of dried fruit beetles.

After checking with our stone fruit farm advisor and a couple of local nurseries, here are some *Prunus persica* variety recommendations for you.

Yellow Peach: Santa Barbara / Suncrest / Summerset

White Peach: Babcock / Arctic Supreme / Snow Babe

Nectarine: Fantasia / Double Delight

Miniature Peach: Honey Babe

Miniature Nectarine: Necta Zee

To sum things up, peach growing requires an extra layer of vigilance towards disease and pruning, but a peach tree is a very special addition for gardeners to consider when enhancing your backyard garden in our sunny San Joaquin Valley. I can honestly report that we really enjoy our 10-year-old backyard Nectar Peach. This variety is a large peach with white flesh, which is firm and juicy with a distinctive floral aroma. Right now, I have a freezer full of sliced peaches, and in my pantry are a dozen jars of yummy peach jam and a gallon jar of Peach Brandy brewing its way toward Christmas. These treats are all the compliments of our peach harvest in July.

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Visalia Farmer's Market, 1st & 3rd Saturdays, 8 - 11 am, Tulare Co. Courthouse

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