

## WISCONSIN SCHOOL GARDEN INITIATIVE BRIEF

# FRUIT TREES IN SCHOOLS: BEFORE YOU PLANT



**Wisconsin  
Partnership Program**  
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN  
SCHOOL OF MEDICINE AND PUBLIC HEALTH

Fruit trees are a logical, and sweet, extension of school gardens. Not only can they provide an abundant source of nutrient-rich food for students and cafeterias, they can also stand for years as the centerpiece of a living ecology classroom. This document provides information on factors to consider before trees are planted, including school approval, choosing and preparing a planting site, and selecting varieties best suited for schools.



### Gaining School Approval

Before planting the school orchard of your dreams, it is important to obtain support from your school or district. Present your idea to both school leadership and building facilities staff. Make sure to ask facilities staff which locations would not interfere with snow removal, mowing clearances, and other upkeep tasks. Let them know that fruit tree maintenance will not fall to them – unless, of course, they volunteer for the job!

#### Useful tools to have in your pocket when pitching your fruit tree idea:

- A rough idea of costs and funding sources
- Possible plans for maintenance and care, especially during summer
- A list of success stories from other school orchards

*Wisconsin examples: [Auburndale High](#), [Midvale Elementary](#), and [DeForest High](#) (partnering with local park).*

*National examples: [The Fruit Tree Planting Foundation](#) has helped install successful orchards in a many schools.*

### Addressing Common Concerns

**Bees:** Bees and other pollinators exist in most outdoor areas. While fruit trees do attract bees while in flower, thoughtful placement of trees can ensure pollinator pathways do not intersect with student walkways or play areas. Moreover, bees make an exciting lesson on the interdependence of species and the importance of pollination in plant life cycles.

**Fallen Fruit:** Plant native perennials or mulched beds beneath each tree where fruit is likely to fall, so fallen fruit does not disrupt walking or mowing. Or, throw fallen fruit into an out-of-the-way compost bin as part of a physical education class!

**Cost:** Fruit tree orchards are excellent subjects for grant proposals; they are a one-time investment with long-term effects!

**Space:** Even one or two productive trees can be an excellent resource. You can even plant two bare root apple trees in one hole to create a multi-stemmed, dual-variety tree that saves on space. Consider tree height when planning: dwarf and semi-dwarf varieties will not grow as tall, for easier picking and pruning.

**Insects and Disease:** Not all pests and diseases are detrimental to fruit harvests, although some are. Integrated pest management techniques make excellent lessons for students. Educate yourself first with these UW Extension guides: [Growing Apples in Wisconsin](#), [Growing Pears in Wisconsin](#), [Growing Apricots, Cherries, Peaches & Plums in Wisconsin](#).

## Choosing and Preparing a Planting Site

Once you receive approval to plant fruit trees, you will need to decide where your school's trees will be located. Get your building facilities staff involved in the planning process. Have them walk the grounds with you to determine the best locations, or get their approval after you've chosen your top sites. Mark each site with simple flags or wooden stakes.

- Avoid high-traffic areas where trees could get trampled (i.e. sports fields), or areas where fallen fruit will become a nuisance (sidewalks, parking lots). Avoid snow removal 'dump' areas or areas that will limit mower or snow-blower clearance routes.
- Choose a location where larger trees or buildings will not block out sunlight. Areas with south-facing exposure are best. Make sure there is access to water nearby.
- Select an area where students are likely to have frequent access to trees in an educational setting. Outdoor classrooms or gardens are ideal. Fruit trees can make wonderful borders or centerpieces. With proper pruning, trees will remain short and will not shade vegetables.



### Determine if the sites you've chosen will intersect with any buried cables or wires:

Ask building facilities staff if they have records for buried wires, including fiber optic cables. If there is an accurate, up-to-date record, you may not need to do anything else. If there is any question that the school record is inaccurate or out of date:

1. Call Digger's Hotline at 1-800-242-8511. They will mark all underground wires for free, *except* privately installed lines, such as most fiber-optic internet cables and wiring to parking lot lights.
2. Determine the location of any private lines by calling a private locator. Digger's Hotline has a list of private locates for Wisconsin on their website: <http://www.diggershotline.com/>

## Selecting Varieties

The varieties, or cultivars, of fruit trees available can be overwhelming. The [UW Extension Fruit Team](#) has several excellent guides for choosing the varieties best suited for small-scale orchards in Wisconsin, including hardiness and ability to resist disease. The links below can help you learn about variety selection for your area.

[Home Fruit Tree Cultivars for Northern Wisconsin](#): Apples, Pears, Cherries, Plum, Apricots

[Home Fruit Tree Cultivars for Southern Wisconsin](#): Apples, Pears, Cherries, Plums, Apricots

[Apple Cultivars for Wisconsin](#): More specific information on the many apple varieties to choose from!

**Pollination needs:** While some fruit trees can self-pollinate, most apple and pear trees must be cross-pollinated in order to produce fruit —this means that two or more trees of different varieties must be planted, so bees can move pollen from one tree to the other. Note that Bartlett and Seckel pears do not pollinate each other.

**Other trees to consider:** Serviceberry (shade tolerant, edible early spring fruit attracts birds), red-bud (edible blossoms), aronia (shrub with tart, smoothie-perfect berries), crabapple (for pollination). For information on native Wisconsin edible forest trees, contact LEAF, Wisconsin's K-12 Forestry Education Program, at [leaf@uwsp.edu](mailto:leaf@uwsp.edu)

Information about purchasing trees is available in the WSGI brief *Fruit Trees in Schools: Planting, Programming, and Aftercare*.



For more information about the Wisconsin School Garden Initiative,

visit us at [WISchoolGardens.org](http://WISchoolGardens.org)

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