

## WISCONSIN SCHOOL GARDEN INITIATIVE BRIEF

# FRUIT TREES IN SCHOOLS: PLANTING, PROGRAMMING, & AFTERCARE



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

**Congratulations! Your school orchard will soon be a reality! If you are new to school orchards, review WSGI's "Fruit Trees in Schools: Before You Plant" brief for more information. This document contains advice and resources on planting, aftercare, and how to keep your students involved.**



### Planting guidelines:

- Dig a hole wide enough to accommodate all of the trees roots without bending or bunching. Your hole should extend outwards 4-6 inches beyond the reach of the roots. Tree roots grow horizontally, not down.
- Your hole should be just deep enough so that when the roots rest on the bottom, the crown —the joint between the rootstock and the trunk — is even with the soil level. The graft union—modest bump 2-3" above the crown—should remain above ground, or any “dwarfing” properties of the tree will be lost.
- Fill in your hole with the same soil you dug out of it. Do not fill with compost, peat, or other additives as these will encourage roots to stay within the confines of the hole, instead of spreading outward for a stronger tree base.
- Leave a shallow “watering basin” at the base of the tree so water does not run away from the trunk. Give your tree approximately five gallons of water after planting.

#### Bare Root Trees

Bare root trees must be planted in spring, before they begin to leaf out. Ask your local nursery about the best time to plant for your area. Before planting, soak the tree's roots in water for 3-6 hours. Cover with a wet mulch or cloth during planting so root do not dry out. For best results, use a root stimulator mix. The Arbor Day Foundation has an excellent step-by-step guide for [planting bare root trees](#).

**Advantages:** Bare root trees are usually much cheaper than their potted cousins. Although they look smaller, they will perform just as well as potted trees within 1-2 years of growth. Often available in many varieties.

#### Potted Trees

Potted trees can be planted at any point during the growing season, although spring and fall are favored. Bare root trees can be turned into potted trees simply by planting into a large pot – this can be a good strategy if you run out of time to plant bare roots in the spring. Potted trees may become “root bound” in pots –loosen and straighten roots as much as possible when planting.

**Advantages:** You do not have to worry about planting within a certain time frame for potted trees. There is also less concern about roots drying out if you are not able to plant right away. Trees are often bigger their first year.

**After care guidelines:**

The Fruit Tree Planting Foundation has an excellent [guide to aftercare](#). Here are some important points:

**Watering:** Water deeply, but infrequently. If the soil is moist 6 inches below the surface, 6 inches away from the trunk of the tree, do not water. Overwatering blocks oxygen from getting to roots.

**Mulching:** Apply mulch 2-3 inches thick around base of tree – not touching trunk. Use woodchips, straw, or chopped leaves.

**Pruning:** Attend a hands-on pruning workshop or invite an Extension agent to host one at your school. In Wisconsin, the best time to prune is March, while the tree is still dormant. Your first pruning should happen 4-5 years after initial planting. Prune once per year thereafter.

**Thinning:** Pinch off small fruits so that only 1-2 fruits develop in one cluster. This will give larger, tastier fruits.

**Pest Control: Do I need to spray my trees?** You do not need to spray, especially if you don't care much about fruit aesthetics. Fruit can have a little insect damage and still taste great. Pre-emptive insect control such as choosing disease-resistant varieties and cutting off nests or infested branches as soon as they appear can keep most insects in check. Inviting natural pest predators with native plants that attract beneficial insects is another spray-free strategy. If you do choose to spray, use organic varieties.

Aftercare Schedule Overview
<b>Spring:</b> Mulching, Thinning
<b>Summer:</b> Watering, Pest Management, Picking
<b>Fall:</b> Picking, Picking, Picking
<b>Late winter:</b> Pruning

**Securing Summer Maintenance**

It is important to have someone to visit your trees at least once a week in summer to check for pests, water as needed, and pick ripe fruits. The promise of free fruit should attract plenty of willing volunteers! Consider asking local summer camps or other youth programs out for a picking day if you have summer-ripening fruit such as cherries.

**Getting Students Involved**

Fruit trees will naturally attract students' attention, and can be excellent focal areas for outdoor lessons and activities. Here are just a few ideas to get your wheels turning:

- Picking, eating, and cooking!
- Serving fruit as a snack in the classroom or cafeteria.
- Fruit fundraiser.
- Outdoor lessons in the "tree classroom" (perennials vs. annuals, plant life cycles, cultural significant of fruit trees, etc)
- Events coinciding with blossoming or fruiting times: outdoor concerts, festivals, open houses or community nights.



**Resources**

Purchasing trees and shrubs: Contact your local nursery. Or, McKay Nursery has delivery throughout Wisconsin: [www.mckaynursery.com](http://www.mckaynursery.com).

Fruit Tree Planting Foundation: Guide to aftercare, pruning videos, and more: <http://www.ftpf.org/index.php>

UW Extension's Tree Fruit Team: Pruning guides, Wisconsin varieties, and more: [http://fruit.wisc.edu/tree\\_fruit](http://fruit.wisc.edu/tree_fruit)

LEAF: Wisconsin's K-12 Forestry Education Program has a collection of [School Grounds Lessons](#) that fit in easily with fruit trees on site!



**For more information about the Wisconsin School Garden Initiative,**

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

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