

# Apple Tree Planting and Care Guide



## Planting Guide

1. Apple trees require at least one pollinator tree of a different variety to produce fruit. Crabapple trees common to urban/suburban neighborhoods make great pollinator trees, but if you live in a more rural area and haven't seen apple trees around, you'll want to plant a second variety.
2. Choose the best site:
  - Sun: Full sun (at least 8 hours per day)
  - Soil: Any soil type; soil slightly acidic with pH between 6 and 7. Do not plant in areas that develop standing water after rainfall.
  - Spacing: Plant semi-dwarf apple trees at least 12-15 feet apart. Plant within 100 feet of a pollinator tree.
3. Dig a hole no deeper than the root system and twice as wide.
4. Mix compost/peat moss into the removed dirt, up to  $\frac{1}{3}$  by volume.
5. Examine the tree roots - if you see woody roots wrapped in a circle, straighten them or make several cuts into the root ball before you plant.
6. Position the apple tree in the hole. Identify the graft union (slight bend/bulge towards the base of the tree where the variety was grafted onto rootstock.) Make sure the graft union is at least 4 inches above the soil line. You'll need another person to make sure the tree stands straight up
7. Backfill the hole, tamping down to remove air pockets as you replace the soil.
8. Once the hole is filled, tamp down gently, then water the tree thoroughly to remove any more air pockets. If the soil settles a couple of inches after watering, add more soil and pack it down.
9. Stake/support the tree by pounding the stake(s) at least 2 feet into the ground. Attach the tree to the stake(s) with tree ties or another wide, non-abrasive material. Don't use wire or twine because they can damage the bark.
10. Optional: apply a few inches of mulch up to a 3 foot radius around the base of the tree, keeping the mulch at least 4 inches away from the trunk. Mulch can help maintain soil moisture and reduce weeds.
11. Optional: Install a tree guard (found online and at nurseries). Tree guards help protect young trees from winter damage and animals chewing on their bark. Once the tree has flaky, mature bark, tree guards are no longer needed. You may want to add a ring of fencing, especially in winter, if deer are a problem.

## Caring for Your Apple Tree

- Watering: Water thoroughly during the growing season (approx. May-October) if there hasn't been much rain. Apple trees prefer 1 inch of water (rainfall or irrigation) every week. Slow sprinklers or other slow soaking methods work best. Use a trowel to make sure the soil is damp several inches down after watering or rain. You are aiming for roots that are moist without being waterlogged.
- Weeding: Remove grass and weeds from a 3 foot circle around your tree for the first 3-5 years. Grass especially drains moisture from the soil quickly and hinders tree growth. A layer of mulch will reduce the amount of weeding required. See step 10 above.
- Support: Keep your tree staked or otherwise supported for its first 2 years in the ground. See step 8 above.
- Protect: To help prevent animal and winter damage, use a tree guard and a ring of fencing if needed. See step 11 above. To help prevent disease and pest problems, keep the area around your apple tree free of debris, fallen fruit and leaves, pruned branches, and weeds.
- Thinning fruit: Do this in late June/early July, when fruit is marble size and some has naturally dropped off the tree. Remove some fruit, leaving 1-2 per flower cluster, and 4-6 inches between fruit. Thinning improves the quality of the apples harvested in the fall and keeps the tree producing fruit steadily from year to year.
- Harvesting Apples: Keep an eye on your apples as their usual harvest time approaches. Watch for the background color (the not red apple skin) to turn from green to a greenish yellow as the apples ripen. Pick a couple and taste until you think they're ripe. Gently lift and twist in a smooth motion to pick an apple, or hold the short, thick fruiting spur attached to the stem and life-twist the apple. The spur has next year's fruiting buds, so don't damage or remove it! Harvest apples as they ripen over a few weeks. Store apples in cool, high humidity spots - the refrigerator works best. If a freeze hits before your apples are all harvested, they should be okay if the temp doesn't go below 28°F for too long. Wait for the apples to thaw before picking. Use them soon after.
- Pruning: Fruit trees should be pruned in late winter/early spring after the worst of the cold but before growing begins. The goal of pruning is to give the tree well spaced branches, a balanced appearance, and to remove broken, diseased, and dead branches. The University of Minnesota Extension has an apple tree pruning guide [here](#).
- Maintenance: If your tree branches are growing 8-12 inches per year (or 12-18 inches per year for non-fruit-bearing trees), replenish nitrogen levels by adding compost once a year. If your tree is growing faster than that, don't add compost. Apple trees generally won't need fertilizer.

*Adapted from [University of MN Extension "Growing Apples in the Home Garden"](#). Click the link for more detailed information.*