Planting a fruit tree is, or at least should be, a considered act involving a well thought-out plan. In a sense, you “design” a tree, or by extension, an orchard—and as tempting as it may be to grab a shovel and start digging, the last thing you do is plant the tree.

There are many elements to the plan for successful deciduous fruit tree growing. They include, but are not limited to—

- Site selection
- Soil—assessment and improvement
- Scale and diversity of the planting
- What genera and species (apple, pear, plum, peach, etc.) and what varieties grow well in an area
- Pollination
- Irrigation
- A fertility plan and associated fertilizers
- Sanitation, particularly on the orchard floor
- Weed management
- Pruning/training systems
- Thinning
- Pest and disease control
- Sourcing quality trees
- The planting hole and process
- Harvest and post-harvest

All of the above factors comprise the jigsaw puzzle or the Rubik’s Cube of fruit growing. In essence, you must align all the colored cubes to induce smiles on the faces of both growers and consumers.

This article focuses on the selection of genera, species, and varieties that do well in Santa Cruz County, and discusses chill hour requirements as one major criterion for successful fruit tree growing.

**The Reliable—and Not So Reliable**

**What Grows Well Here**

By “what grows well,” I mean what produces a reliable annual crop and is relatively disease and pest free. In Santa Cruz County, that includes—

- Apples
- Pears—both European and Asian
- Quinces
- Plums
- Prune plums
- Pluots
- Persimmons (arguably the easiest of all fruits to grow and maintain)
- Walnuts
Over the years, the Alan Chadwick Garden has served as a testing ground for determining which fruit tree species and varieties grow well in Santa Cruz’s variable weather conditions.

Similarly, different fruit species have different chill hour requirements —

- Apples and Pears: 100–2,200 hours
- Apricots, Peaches, Nectarines: 300–1,500 hours
- Japanese or Asian Plums: 300–1,500 hours
- European Prune Plums: 500–1,700 hours
- Persimmons: 300–600 hours
- Apriums and pluots are similar to their dominant parent

Note that almost any chill hour chart will have discrepancies. It is worth experimenting, but not too much (variance in chill hour requirements) or too many (due to cost of trees).

While the weather in Santa Cruz County is variable from the coast to the summit, and as for consistency year to year it is “nothing if not erratic,” it could more clinically be categorized as having moderate to extreme “interannual variability.”

We average 500–800 hours of chill per year. As of January 5, 2012 we had already logged in 576 hours. At the same point last year (January 2011) we had a mere 350 hours. With the La Niña pattern in place, we could potentially amass 900–1,000 chill hours this year. While we can sometimes crop varieties with as low a chill as 300–350 hours and conversely with as high as 900–1,000 hours, trees requiring 500–800 chill hours are the tried and true ones for our region, with 700 chill hours being an even more reliable upper end.

These days, with deciduous fruit tree growing spread across the globe, there is considerable importance in matching a fruit tree variety’s required chill hours with both conducive, predictable weather and the chill hours of your area. Not all trees grow everywhere.
What follows is a chart of reliable fruit, their varieties, and their chill hour requirements for Santa Cruz County and environs. This chart is based on two factors: my personal growing experience in the region over 35 years at elevations from sea level to 800 feet, and my personal preferences regarding taste. Life is too short to grow less-than-superlative varieties of fruit. Good luck, plan well, and did I mention the last thing you do is plant the tree!

Reliable Fruit Tree Varieties for Santa Cruz County & Their Chill Hour Requirements

Apples

**Cox’s Orange Pippin Parentage**

- Fiesta, Freyburg, Holstein, Queen Cox, Rubinette: 600–800
- Corail (a.k.a. Sonata, Pinova): 800
- Cox’s Orange Pippin: 800

**Golden Delicious Parentage**

- Mollie’s Delicious: 400–500
- Gala: 500–600
- Mutsu: 600
- Golden Delicious: 700
- Jonagold (and related strains): 700–800
- Chehalis, Elstar: 800–1,000

**McIntosh Parentage**

- Beverly Hills: 300
- Shay: 700–800
- Empire Mac, Macoun, McIntosh, Rodger’s McIntosh, Spartan: 800

**Russeted Apples (all of these crop reliably in Santa Cruz County)**

- Gold Rush: 600
- St. Edmund’s Pippin: 600–700
- Hoople’s Antique Gold: 600–800
- Ashmead’s Kernal, Razor Russet Spitzenburg: 800
- American Golden Russet, Belle de Boskoop, Hudson’s Golden Gem: 800–1,000

**Other Apple Varieties**

- Arkansas Charm: 400
- Pink Lady: 400–500
- Cameo, Fuji, Pink Pearl: 600
- Braeburn, Gravenstein, Yellow Newtown Pippin: 700
- Hauer Pippin, Sierra Beauty: 700–800
- Honeycrisp, Idared: 800
- Bramley’s: 800–1,000

Pears

**Summer or Butter Pears**

- Seckel: 500
- Bartlett: 500–600
- Warren: 600

**Winter Pears**

- Bosc: 500–600
- Comice: 600
- D’Anjou, Flemish Beauty, Orcas, Rescue: 800

Quinces

- Pineapple, Orange, Smyrna: 300–500

Pomegranates

- Sweet: 100
- Wonderful: 150

Persimmons

- Fuyu, Haychia: 100–200 (despite their low chill requirements, they bloom late and set annually)

Peaches

**Peach Leaf Curl Resistant Varieties**

- Avalon, Mary Jane: 600
- Frost, Indian Free: 700
- Q 1-8: 700–800

**Other Peach Varieties**

- Babcock, Saturn (Peento, Donut): 200–300
- Late Elberta: 600–700
- Arctic Supreme: 700
- Baby Crawford, Indian Blood, Red Haven, White Lady: 800

Nectarines

- Double Delight: 300
- Arctic Jay, Fantasia: 500
- Arctic Glo, Arctic Queen, Arctic Rose: 600–700
- Arctic Blaze (taste test winner): 700–800

Plums

- Beauty: 250
- Satsuma/Mariposa, Shiro (yellow): 300
- Catalina: 300–400
- Golden Nectar, Santa Rosa/Late Santa Rosa: 400
- Emerald Beauty: 600–700

Prune Plums

- Sugar Prune: 500
- Early Italian, French Improved, Italian Prune, Stanley: 800

Pluots

- Dapple Dandy, Flavor Grenade: 400–500
- Flavor Queen, Flavor Supreme: 500–600

Apriums

- Cot-N-Candy, Flavor Delight: 200–300

Apricots

- Blenheim (Royal): 400
- Moorpark: 600

Figs

- Black Mission, Blackjack (dwarf), Brown Turkey, Osborne Prolific, White Genoa: 100 (despite their low chill, they set reliably)

Cherries

- Stella (dwarf): 400
- Lapins: 500
- Craig’s Crimson (dwarf): 800

Walnuts

- Pedro (a somewhat “natural dwarf”): 400
- Chandler: 700