



Mulberries

©Annette McFarlane 2008

Mulberries are rarely found on supermarket shelves as the fruit has a short shelf life. You will occasionally find them in farmers markets or organic outlets stocking locally grown produce. When available they typically command high prices because of the rarity of supply and labour intensive harvest. If you love mulberries, the only sensible option is to grow your own tree. Fortunately it is easier than you might think.



Quick Fact File

Botanical Name: Morus species

Common Name: Mulberry

Family: Moraceae

Origin: The Middle East, China, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and USA.

Climatic Range: Adaptable to a range of climatic types from cool temperate to tropical regions, with climate type influencing growth habit.

Description: Mostly large, deciduous trees with heart-shaped, lobed or unlobed leaves, toothed margins and three main veins emerging from the base. Monoecious or dioecious, fruiting trees produce succulent, drupe fruit.

Tree of Plenty

Mulberry trees have plenty to offer the home gardener. Apart from their delicious fruit, they are very long-lived trees adapted to a wide variety of climate zones, soil types and watering regimes. Frost tolerant once established, you can grow them just about anywhere.

Mulberries are very fast growing in warm climates, often bearing fruit in the first year after planting. They are much slower to establish in cooler regions and young trees are best protected from frost.

Summer Sun and Winter Shade

Growing into potentially enormous trees in cool districts through to subtropical climates, mulberries become more shrub-like in the tropics. As deciduous trees they provide great winter sun and terrific summer shade when allowed to grow to their full potential. The large, heart-shaped leaves turn an attractive yellow colour before they fall.

Wet, Dry, Sun or Shade?

Mulberries will grow with their roots practically in water, but are also very drought tolerant once established. Water stressed trees rarely die, but fruit may drop prematurely if trees cannot access adequate ground water in the lead up to fruiting.

Full sun positions are best. Trees in semi shade will survive but growth will tend to be slower and elongate towards available light. Like all fruit trees, the better the soil preparation, the more rapid the growth and more likely you are to obtain a productive harvest. Dig a deep hole and incorporate nutrient rich compost prior to planting. Water trees in with liquid seaweed or compost tea to aid establishment and root growth.

Big or Small

All trees respond well to pruning so by selecting smaller growing varieties and pruning them each year, it is possible to keep them to a manageable size in small gardens. You can even confine them to large containers.

Basket Cases

Mulberry trees have long, pliable branches that are popular with basket weavers. Some creative gardeners also use pruned branches to make woven fences and screens to use in the garden.

Sorting Out the Sexes





Few gardeners realise that mulberries may be male, female or bisexual. Commercial varieties or those purchased from a nursery are bisexual or self pollinating, so only one tree is required for good fruit production. If you have a tree that has grown from seed, it may occasionally turn out to be male or female. If it is female and there is a source of pollen available from other nearby trees, your tree will set fruit. If your tree turns out to be male, you will never harvest any fruit.

Male trees produce copious flowers that resemble tiny green fruit. It is easy to be fooled into thinking these flowers will ripen. Bees love male mulberry flowers, so always be suspicious of any tree that is completely covered in bees when it flowers. When their pollen is spent, the male flowers soon drop off and the tree develops its lush spring foliage canopy.

Keeping Fruit Within Reach

Mulberries produce fruit on new growth. This means that regular pruning does not necessarily jeopardise potential fruit production. Many gardeners prune trees back in early winter to thin overly dense growth. After the first season's crop is produced and the trees come back into leaf, it is possible to cut trees back again. This can encourage a fresh burst of growth and a second, smaller crop of fruit. By choosing a small growing cultivar like Dwarf Black and pruning once or twice during the year, it is possible to keep trees to a size that is easy to manage.

Perfect to Propagate

Modern selections are self-pollinating. If you know of a mulberry in your local area that produces terrific tasting fruit it is very easy to propagate new plants by taking hardwood cuttings. Winter is generally the preferred time, but these plants propagate so easily that you can successfully strike cuttings at just about anytime of year.

Look for wood that is at least the diameter and length of a pencil. Make the base cut just below the node or leaf joint on the stem and ensure that there is a plump, healthy bud at the top end of the stem. Place the cutting directly into prepared soil or into a pot filled with seed raising mixture or compost.



Get Into Grafting

Mulberries also graft relatively easily. A seed grown plant or cutting taken from a vigorous growing plant can be grafted with a known performing variety using standard grafting techniques. This is best done while the rootstock tree is still deciduous, but when the sap is beginning to rise. This occurs just before bud burst.

The key to success is speed in making and joining together the rootstock and cultivated variety. This must be done quickly so that the cut tissue surface does not dry out. Grafting wax or budding tape is used to secure the graft until the union forms its own natural callus a few months later.

If you have an existing tree that fruits poorly you may be able to graft an improved variety on to an existing branch.

Black or White

Trees fruit in late winter to early spring in tropical and subtropical climates. In warm climates, flowering, fruit formation and development of the foliage canopy is very rapid and the harvest period lasts just a few weeks. Additional watering in tropical, subtropical and dry inland areas in the lead up to bud burst, helps to increase fruit size and juice content.

The on-set of fruiting is more gradual in cooler climates allowing for an extended harvest in late spring and early summer.

Flowers form in short, dense spikes in the leaf axils. Black





fruiting types are generally considered to have the most flavour and resemble elongated blackberries. There are also some sweet, non-staining white selections that produce either small white, squat fruit or long thin fruit. These are popular with rare fruit fanciers and gardeners keen to avoid sharing their mulberry crop with local birds.

Berry Versatile

Mulberries are so delicious fresh from the tree that majority of the crop never makes it into the kitchen. If you do manage to harvest berries that make it indoors, they can be made into jam and deserts. More adventurous types could try turning excess fruit into wine or port. The fruit can also be dried.

I freeze vast quantities of mulberries for desserts, pies and summer smoothies. Simply clip the green fruit stalk from each berry, rinse and drain the fruit, then place them in bags or containers before placing them in the freezer.



Drop some frozen berries into the base of a glass of champagne for a touch of homegrown glamour. A few thawed mulberries rubbed through a sieve makes an ideal natural food colouring for anything that looks best in pink like icing on cakes or party drinks.

Downside to Being Delicious

There is a downside to bearing delicious, succulent fruit. Your crop harvest can be jeopardised by flocks of birds out to get their fill. Dispersal of seed by birds has also put the mulberry on the weed hit list of many local authorities. Fortunately, both white and red-fruited Shahtoot mulberry selections are largely seedless. This makes them the best option where mulberry fruit have weed potential.

You also have to hope that the birds that steal your crop do not decide to leave their calling card on your clothesline or the bonnet of the family car.

Fruit stains from black or purple types can be hard to remove. White fruiting types are non-staining and few birds appear to be able to distinguish the white fruit from the foliage. An entire crop can often ripen without attracting the attention of local birds, but fruit bats and possums may not be so easily fooled.

If you live in a region prone to fruit fly, you may get a little extra protein in your berries. Fruit fly can attack fruit. The latter half of the crop harvest appears particularly vulnerable to attack in subtropical regions.

Beating the Birds

My strategy to beat the birds is to begin to harvest the mulberries as soon as they start to ripen. Despite what many books say, the fruit does ripen post harvest in warm climates, providing you pick the fruit once they begin to colour.

Initially the harvest may be just a cup full, then half an icecream container, and then half a bucket each day. By the time the birds discover the mulberries are ripening, I am well and truly over my daily harvesting routine and have enough fruit in the freezer to last till the following year. The remainder of the crop can be enjoyed by local birds or left to drop to the ground where the fruit is relished equally by the hens and ducks.

The only other alternative crop protection method available to most gardeners involves caging or netting the entire tree. This can be used to protect fruit from birds, fruit bats and possums.

Feast of Foliage

The young foliage of mulberry trees can be used as a substitute for grape leaves. In fact, historical records indicate that they were used to wrap food long before vine leaves. Mulberry leaves are also used as a medicinal tea by some cultures and the young leaves and stems consumed as a vegetable.

While the foliage of mulberries is traditional silkworm fare, it is also relished by cattle, horses, sheep, pigs and other livestock as a highly palatable and easily digestible source of protein.



Mulberry trees are considered fire retardant as their green foliage and latex filled stems are reluctant to burn. Trees are popularly planted beside chicken runs and duck ponds. They provide summer shade and poultry are generally quick to consume any tasty morsels of fruit that drop from the tree.

Mulberry trees are affected by fungal and bacterial leaf diseases. Fortunately these are mostly cosmetic. While they can create brown and burnt areas of tissue, they do not seriously affect fruit production and do not require preventative or control treatments.



Not Fussy on Fertiliser

Some mulberry trees produce copious quantities of fruit year after year without gardeners ever applying fertiliser. Of course, additional water and nutrition will help your tree live a longer and more productive life. Young trees certainly establish more quickly with regular water and fertiliser applications. If applying compost, animal manure or organically certified fruit tree fertiliser to established mulberry trees, this should be done just before spring bud burst or immediately after any pruning.

Accompany any compost or dry fertiliser application with a deep watering. Avoid applying fertiliser to established trees during the late summer and autumn growing season as this can encourage excessive vegetative growth, making trees harder to control.

Fruiting Varieties

White Mulberry (*Morus alba*)

Produces stout, greenish-yellow to cream fruit in late spring. Foliage is popular for rearing silkworms. Flavour is considered inferior to black fruited selections.

Black English (*Morus nigra*)

Recommended for cooler regions, this selection has a shorter season than other varieties, but produces superbly flavoured large, black fruit.

Hicks Fancy (*Morus rubra*)

Recommended for cooler regions, this variety produces small, slightly red fruit but provides a good harvest over an extended season.

Downs Everbearing (*Morus rubra*)

North American selection suitable for cool climates producing large, long, deep red fruit.

Dwarf Black (*Morus nigra*)

Dwarf grafted tree growing to around five metres. Produces full flavoured, black fruit and is suitable for warm climates.

White Shahtoot (*Morus macroura*)

Eight to ten metres high with sweet, long thin, pale cream/green berries. The weeping habit is often accentuated by grafting on to *Morus alba* rootstock.

Red Shahtoot (*Morus macroura*)

Dwarf tree growing three to five metres with a compact growth habit. Long fruit dark brown/red in colour. Fruit has a sweet, honey flavour.

Buzza Black (*Morus nigra*)

A large growing heirloom variety with tasty, black fruit. Extremely hardy, it is very drought-resistant once established.

Weeping Mulberry (*Morus alba* 'Pendula')

This highly ornamental variety is typically grafted as a 1.75m high standard. It bears weeping foliage down to the ground, but only a meagre fruit crop.

Native Mulberry

Pipturus argenteus is commonly known as the native mulberry. Female trees of this rainforest species produce small, white fruit over many months. The fruit is popular with birds and is a favourite food source of the Scaly-breasted Lorikeet. The leaves provide nourishment for a variety of native butterfly larvae and other chewing insects.

