

Loquat Trees

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If you want a small, evergreen tree that gets only 25 feet in height, with a symmetrical, compact, form and produces fruit, then the loquat is for you. The loquat (*Eriobotrya japonica* Lindl), sometimes known as the Japanese Plum, can be found in subtropical areas throughout the world, including here in Florida.

Due to its smaller size, the loquat is a great tree for small yards and cramped spaces. While the loquat blooms white, very fragrant, flowers from October through February, the fruit is ready for harvest in early spring through May. You can recognize loquats this time of year by their large clusters of small fuzzy yellow fruit.

Taking only 120 days to mature, the oval shaped fruit is sweet and juicy with a single pit. Most trees bear regularly and well even when growing far from other loquat trees. A tree 5 years old may bear up to 100 pounds of fruit in a normal year. Some trees may bear so heavily that fruits are small. Removing several fruits when they are small can increase the size of the remaining fruit. This practice is called thinning.

Fruit from a loquat tree can be eaten fresh. You can also make jelly, jam, preserves, pies and even freeze them for later use. Pinch off the blossom end, squeeze the seed out and pop the fruit in your mouth for a tasty treat in the garden. For the best flavor, allow the fruit ripens on the tree.

Loquats are easily grown from seeds but the fruit quality is unpredictable, although they are satisfactory for ornamental use. Superior varieties do not become true from seed, so it is necessary to plant vegetatively propagated trees. Grafted trees will bear fruit in 2 - 3 years. While a seedling tree will take 5 - 6 years. If possible, look for named varieties such as 'Gold Nugget' or 'Champagne'. The varieties 'Oliver', 'Wolf' and 'Tanaka' are also favorites at nurseries, which specialize, in tropical fruits.

Loquat trees grow well in full sun. They do well in many types of soil and can be grown in nearly any soil in Florida, which is well drained. Although it tolerates drought, the loquat will not bear good crops of fruit under dry conditions. In Florida some irrigation may be needed during time of bloom and fruit development. Flooding quickly kills the loquat tree.

No pruning is necessary except for occasionally removing any dead wood. Fruit size and quality can be improved by removing some branches so that fewer clusters of fruit are produced and all fruits are exposed to sunlight.

Tolerant of cold weather, a mature dormant tree can withstand temperatures of 10°F without serious injury, but temperatures below 27 or 28°F will damage the flowers and fruit. Fire blight, (*Erwinia amylovoradisease*), is a bacterium disease, and may be a problem at times. The disease attacks young shoots and causes them to turn brown. The dead leaves will remain hanging on the stems. To eliminate this disease, trim out damaged stems beyond just the dead tissue. Avoid spreading the disease by keeping pruning equipment clean. Dip pruning clippers in a dilute bleach solution (one part bleach to 9 parts water) between cuts.

You may also notice a problem with the Caribbean Fruit Fly, (*Anastrepha suspense*). Larva of this fruit fly may destroy mature fruit as it stays on the trees. No practical chemical control is presently available for home gardens. If a problem, harvest fruit just as they ripen before infestation of the fruit fly occurs.

Like with all plants there are a few disadvantages of the loquat tree. Although, the plant is considered an evergreen and will have green leaves all year, they will also lose leaves all year long. Compulsive types spend hours picking up individual leaves as they fall to the ground. If you plan ahead, you can reduce your stress and leave a mulched bed area under the tree. Large brown leaves are not so obvious in a brown-mulched bed as they are on a green lawn. The fruit will also drop as it matures and may become a mess if it falls on the sidewalk or driveway.

Those are just two small disadvantages of an otherwise small, beautiful shade tree. Information for this article was taken from the University of Florida IFAS Publication, "The Loquat". For a free copy and answers to other gardening questions, please contact the Osceola County Master Gardeners Monday thru Friday from 9am to 3pm at (321) 697-3000.