Multi-tasking applies to more than moms and computers; plants can do double duty as well. Loquats, for example, are an attractive small shade tree with fragrant flowers and an edible bonus.

If you are cramped for space but looking for fast shade, consider the loquat. Loquats are ideal for small residential yards since they only grow to 25' tall. They have large dark green leaves and naturally grow to give a spreading umbrella shape creating a large shade area for bench seating or a slider swing.

Loquat trees bloom in the winter and may not fruit some years due to cold damage if temperatures drop below 28°F. The trees survive but you lose the winter fruit crop.

You can recognize loquats this time of year by their large clusters of small fuzzy yellow fruit. The oval shaped fruit is sweet and juicy with a single pit. I like to eat them fresh, but you can also make jelly, jam or preserves. Pinch off the blossom end, squeeze the seed out and pop the fruit in your mouth for a tasty treat in the garden.

The plant is considered evergreen. One disadvantage of broadleaf evergreen plants is that while they have green leaves all year, they 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. Mulch decomposes and enriches our sandy soil as it holds moisture and nutrients.

Loquats are best suited to full sun areas and well drained soil. Avoid planting them in soggy areas.

Loquats are easily grown from seeds but the fruit quality is unpredictable. If possible, look for named varieties such as ‘Gold Nugget’ or ‘Champagne’. ‘Oliver’, ‘Wolf’ and ‘Tanaka’ are also favorites at nurseries which specialize in tropical fruits.

If a friend has a tree which produces tasty fruit, air layer a cutting and you will have a clone, a duplicate, of your friends desirable tree.

Air layering is a fun propagation technique. You force the plant to produce roots on the stem while it is still attached to the tree. The mother plant provides water while the shoot is developing roots so survival is often higher than rooting cuttings.

To air layer, remove a few leaves 8” to 12” from the shoot tip, so you have a 4” to 6” stem section exposed. Scrape a one inch section of the stem to remove the outer layer of tissue all the way around. Dust a small amount of rooting powder on the cut area with a small paint brush or cotton swab. Have ready a square of plastic wrap, a slit recycled plastic bag or a piece of a bread bag. Two long wire twist ties also come in handy. Soak two hands full of sphagnum moss then gently squeeze to remove dripping water. Now comes the tricky part and the need for an extra set of hands.

Hold the sheet of plastic in your hand and place the clump of wet moss on top. Press a crease in it and fold it around the damaged part of the stem. Hold the plastic tightly and secure the bottom edge to the stem with a wire tie.

Then carefully, fold the edges of the plastic together where the plastic meets to form a good seal and hold in moisture. (Normally this is when the entire clump of moss falls on the ground and you holler for a friend.)

Use another wire tie to secure the top of the plastic around the stem. The plastic holds the moss against the cut stem and provides a moist place for roots to grow while it is still attached to the original mother plant.
Some gardeners prefer to cover the plastic with foil to keep birds from pecking at the worm like roots and prevent sunlight from damaging tender new roots.

Watch roots grow inside the plastic. After a month or so, when the roots fill the moss, you are ready to remove the rooted cutting and plant it in a pot. Be sure to cut the shoot BELOW the rooted area so the new cutting has roots. Don’t make the common mistake of cutting above the roots or you get to plant an un-rooted cutting.

Loquats are easy care plants which require little pruning. Fertilize once or twice a year with any garden or fruit fertilizer. Do not use a weed and feed type fertilizer since it will damage landscape plants. Water as needed during dry winter and spring weather when fruit is forming but avoid over watering.

Fire blight disease is a problem some years. The disease attacks young shoots and causes them to turn brown and dead leaves hang on the stems. To stop this disease, trim out damaged stems well into green tissue. To avoid spreading the disease, dip pruning clippers in a dilute bleach solution (one part bleach to 9 parts water) between cuts.

Home gardeners can have it made in the shade by selecting loquat as an edible shade tree.

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Date: March 29th, 2000