

# South Alabama Gardening: Creating a Low-Maintenance Fruit Orchard

► When designing a fruitful landscape with minimal effort or incorporating a fruit tree into a landscape for a first-time gardener, selecting low-maintenance fruit crops is a key strategy.

In the warm, humid, and rainy climate of south Alabama, where gardening can be rewarding and challenging, incorporating blueberries, persimmons, and fig trees can offer a bountiful harvest with low input. The Gulf Coast environment does not lend itself to some common fruit trees such as peaches and apples, but that does not have to keep south Alabama gardeners from growing fruit right in their own backyards.

## Blueberries: Southern Delight

**Harvest:** March–July

Blueberries are not only a delicious addition to your diet, but they are also well-suited for the South Alabama climate. These hardy shrubs thrive in acidic soils, making them an excellent choice for the region's naturally occurring low pH. Blueberries are relatively low maintenance, requiring well-drained soil, consistent watering, and a sunny location. Two types of blueberries can be grown: southern highbush (SHB) and rabbiteye (RE) blueberries. Homeowners usually go for the RE blueberries with cultivars such as 'Climax', 'Premiere', 'Brightwell', and 'TifBlue'. For a challenge, homeowners may consider trying SHB. These plants are typically smaller than their rabbiteye counterparts and are good candidates for container production. They are more susceptible to deer and bird predation because the berries ripen early in the season (March–May). They also flower during late winter, making them susceptible to freezing events. If a freeze is imminent during bloom, protection will be required to help prevent fruit and flower damage. Some SHB cultivars to try are 'SuziBlue', 'KeeCrisp', and 'Farthing'.

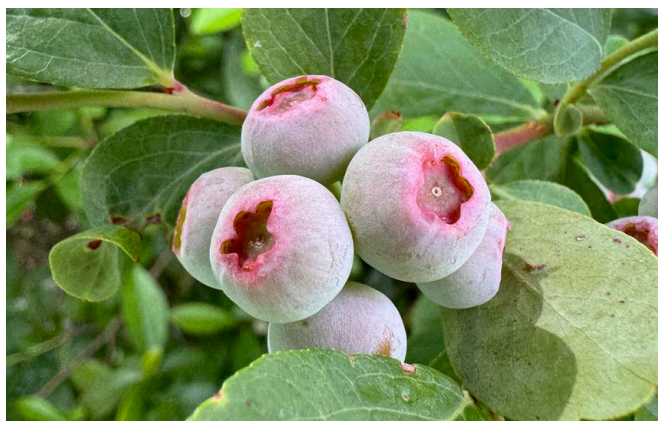
One advantage of blueberries is their adaptability to different landscape designs. Whether you choose to plant them in traditional rows, raised beds, or mixed



with ornamental plants, blueberries contribute to your garden's aesthetic and culinary aspects. When incorporating them into a landscape, group with other acid-loving plants, such as azaleas and camellias.

A layer of mulch is crucial to help blueberries retain soil moisture and suppress weeds, enhancing their productivity. Though blueberries are self-fruitful, planting two different cultivars that flower at the same time will increase fruit yield, berry size, and fruit quality. You can extend your blueberry season for 6 weeks with early, mid-season, and late cultivars of blueberries. Pruning is also a straightforward task, primarily focused on removing dead, diseased, and crowded branches during the dormant season. After 3 or 4 years, remember to remove one to three of your older canes to make room for more productive younger canes. Typically, five to eight canes are adequate to be left after a pruning exercise.

To be successful with blueberries, it's crucial that you conduct a soil test to evaluate the soil pH. Blueberries like a pH between 4.5 and 5.5. If your blueberries are



'Premier' blueberry fruit in May.

placed in an alkaline soil, they will not perform as well. Fertilizing blueberries starts in late March or early April and should cease in August. Homeowners should use a balanced fertilizer that has ammonium sulfate ( $(\text{NH}_4)_2\text{SO}_4$ ), urea ( $\text{COCNH}_2$ ), or sulfur-coated urea ( $(\text{NH}_2)_2\text{CO}$ ). Using a nitrate form of fertilizer, such as nitrate nitrogen ( $\text{NO}_3$ ), can cause blueberry bushes to decline over time and should be avoided. Fertilizers formulated for azaleas and camellias work great for blueberries. As a rule of thumb, fertilize blueberries with



1 ounce of slow-release fertilizer per year of plant age. Fertilizer applications should be made two times a year for heavier soils and once a month in sandy soils. Apply no more than 1 pound (about 454 grams) of fertilizer per year and no more than 8 ounces (about 227 grams) during any one fertilizing event.

Blueberries need to be pollinated by insects. Although blueberries can be self-fertile, the shape of the flower and the characteristics of its pollen require the presence of pollinators to bear fruit. To attract natives and honeybees, allocate an area that attracts them. Plant native nectar plants to attract pollinators: for example, *Coreopsis lanceolata* (lanceleaf tickseed), *Dracopis amplexicaulis* (clasping coneflower), and *Rudbeckia hirta* (black-eyed Susan).



## Persimmons: Sweet and Hardy Option

**Harvest:** September–December



Young Japanese persimmon fruit in May.

Persimmons, known for their sweet and flavorful fruits, are an excellent addition to your low-maintenance fruit garden. Persimmons can get a bad reputation because many people are familiar with the native persimmon, which can be quite astringent when harvested early. The non-native Japanese persimmon cultivars are an excellent addition for a great-tasting nonastringent persimmon. Cultivars such as ‘Fuyu’ and ‘Eureka’ are particularly well-suited for the South Alabama climate. Persimmon trees are easy to care for and can tolerate a variety of soil types.

One of the appealing features of persimmons is their ornamental value. With attractive foliage and a distinctive branching structure, persimmon trees add visual interest to your landscape throughout the year. They are also resistant to many pests and diseases, reducing the need for chemical interventions. The unique harvest time, which is September through December, also adds interest to the landscape.

Regular watering is essential during the establishment phase, but persimmons are relatively drought tolerant once established. Fruit drop and premature defoliation are common problems when trees are stressed. Pruning is minimal and can focus on shaping the tree for better sunlight penetration and air circulation. As a rule of thumb, remove any dead or diseased wood first, followed by branches that are crossing or broken during the dormant season. Pollination for persimmons differs between native and non-native types. Native persimmons are dioecious. This means that each tree produces male or female flowers. One of each would

be required for adequate pollination. There are typically seeds in fertilized fruit. Non-native persimmons can grow male, female, and perfect flowers all on the same plant, and the flowers need not be fertilized for fruit set. The fruit from non-native persimmons are known as *parthenocarpic* and are typically seedless. Only one plant is required for fruit production. Even so, higher yields, consistent cropping, and less fruit drop are seen when multiple persimmons are planted near one another. As a bonus, persimmons provide a late-season harvest, extending the fruiting period in your garden.

Persimmons can reach a mature height of 30 feet though some cultivars stay less than 10 feet. They will require adequate space and should be planted with the mature size in mind. Fertilizing persimmons starts in April and continues until August. Soil tests are recommended before fertilizing persimmons because excess nitrogen can cause premature fruit drop. Two ounces (about 60 grams) of balanced fertilizer per year of age up to 8 pounds (about 3.6 kilograms) per year for exceptionally large trees.

Native persimmons usually produce smaller fruits than their Japanese cousins. Japanese persimmons can have fruit the size of a peach. Fruit can be harvested from September through December and is most flavorful when the fruit is dark orange and slightly soft. Persimmon fruit can be damaged by freeze events and should be harvested accordingly. They will continue to ripen after harvest.



Japanese persimmon fruit ready for harvest.

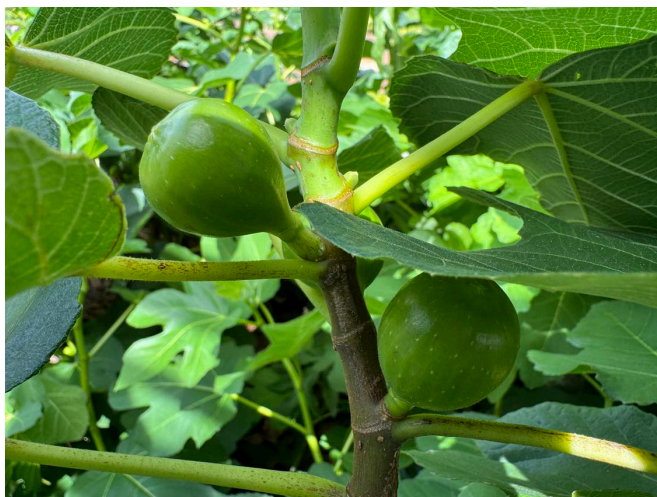
## Fig Trees: Ancient and Resilient

**Harvest:** June–August

Fig trees, with their ancient history and delicious fruits, are another low-maintenance gem for South Alabama landscapes. Cultivars such as 'Celeste' and 'Brown Turkey' thrive in the region, offering sweet and versatile figs. Fig trees are renowned for their adaptability to various soil types, making them well-suited for the diverse conditions in South Alabama.

Fig trees are resilient and require minimal care to thrive. Once established, they are drought tolerant and resistant to many pests and diseases. Providing a sunny location with well-drained soil is vital to their success. Mulching around the base of the tree helps retain moisture and suppress weeds.

Fertilizing figs should be done after bud break during April and June. A soil test should be conducted to determine pH and fertility requirements. Mature fig trees enjoy a soil pH of 5.5 to 7 and are fertilized with a balanced fertilizer at one-half pound (227 grams) per 3 feet of height up to 4 pounds (1.8 kilograms).



Figs set on the tree in May.

A warning: excessive nitrogen can cause fruit to fall off the tree before ripening. Do not fertilize after August, as this can drive unwanted late-season growth that is more susceptible to freezing damage. Pruning fig trees is a simple task, usually involving the removal of dead or overcrowded branches. Unlike most fruit trees, figs produce flowers and fruit on new shoots. Cut back older shoots by one-third every spring to ensure that the plant does not get too large. This is typically done just before bud break in March. Figs can grow 20 feet tall and 20 feet wide. Managing that growth will ensure that your fruit is within arm's reach. Give them plenty of room if you do not want to prune often.

After pruning, consider propagating the leftover cuttings from your tree. Propagating figs is a simple procedure. Take pencil thick (7 millimeter) to half-inch (13 millimeter) cuttings of one-year-old wood during March. These cuttings should be 8 to 10 inches (20 centimeters–25 centimeters) long and have a number of dormant buds on them. Avoid tips of branches and larger diameter cuttings as they do not provide higher root success. Place the cuttings in deep containers or in the ground, buried halfway to the top. Stick them 6 to 8 inches (15 centimeters to 20 centimeters) apart to allow room for roots and space to excavate them later. Well-drained, sandy soils provide the best rooting environment. Keep the soil or substrate moist but not wet. After 4 to 6 weeks, the cutting should be rooted and begin to produce shoots, depending on temperature. These cuttings will be ready to plant in the ground by fall of the same year.

Finally, figs can be grown in containers, making them suitable for small gardens or patios. This adaptability adds to their appeal, allowing homeowners with limited space to enjoy the benefits of homegrown figs.

In conclusion, integrating blueberries, persimmons, and fig trees into your South Alabama landscape is a smart and rewarding choice. These low-maintenance fruit crops provide delicious harvests and contribute to the beauty of your garden. You can create a thriving fruit oasis with minimal effort by selecting varieties that are well-suited for the region's climate and soil conditions.

Remember that low maintenance still requires maintenance. Scout your plants weekly for any insect and disease pressures you can catch early. Blueberries, persimmons, and fig trees are still hosts to various pests and diseases, but right cultivar selection, correct placement in your landscape, and weekly scouting can ensure a fruitful harvest throughout the year.





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**New May 2024**, ANR-3078

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