



Season 1 Episode 3—Fruit Selection

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Announcer

Welcome to the *Southern Ground* podcast provided by Alabama Extension, through Auburn University. Extension educators Shane Harris and Dr. Chip East discuss seasonal lawn and garden topics, address common questions, and provide the practical solutions you want to know. Let's dig into our *Southern Ground*.

Shane Harris

Hello everyone and welcome to *Southern Ground*. I'm Shane Harris, and with me again is Chip East. And today in episode three we're going to dig deeper into another topic. Topic that's very timely here for, mid-January in the middle of winter, selecting fruits to grow around your home or your farm.

Chip East

Yeah, there's a lot of different reasons to grow fruits. And there's we need to talk about why we would. It's not just what I like to eat. It's like what grows well in your area. And it's just something to think about before we plant. But I mean, obviously we want to plant the, the crops we do like to eat, but some of them are a little harder to grow than others. And you just need to understand how to manage the crop before you, you buy it. Looks good in a picture, but how does it do in your, on your property?

Shane Harris

Yeah, and being wintertime now a lot of people start begin to anticipate spring to think about planting some fruit trees, some small fruits. Start thinking about what varieties work here in the in Alabama and the Deep South. They're being teased from the seed catalogs and online photos from social media. Oh, they like I said, that's a, that's a pretty plant or so even to see it in a grocery store, farmer's market.

I wish I could grow that, or I wish I had that as part of my home, orchard or farm. So, it's a good time to be at least thinking about it, possibly selecting it, and even planting, some in your home orchard.

Chip East

Absolutely. And there's reasons why we would want to grow our own. And I can tell you whether you're the farmer or the homeowner, freshness is a big deal. And I always tell farmers, they'll ask, well, you know, I'm starting to farm or I'm thinking about growing a new crop. What should I grow? And I always say, wherever you buy produce at, think about the produce that tastes good and the produce that tastes bad.

And if you're really thinking of something to add, the money's made in growing the produce that tastes bad. And what I mean by that, well, sometimes through shipping and everything, for instance, tomatoes might not taste as good from certain places as they would off of a farm. Well, that's a could, could be a money maker. That could be a good crop to grow.

Peaches. Might taste terrible from certain locations or certain places. But to the farmer in freshness, oh, that's a good moneymaker for them. Strawberries is another one, you see. So yeah, they, a lot of people don't know what a fresh, you know, certain things taste like because they've always purchased things that are not fresh. Freshness by far is the number one reason to grow your own.

Shane Harris

And having fresh fruit, fresh vegetables, everybody loves that. But the first question or second question we would ask... is how many do you want? You know, you and I can eat a fresh peach in the middle of July. We might want 1 or 2 peaches, but we probably don't need several bushels of peaches. That's a lot of peaches to eat at one time before they begin to rot or go bad.

What are you going to do with them? Are you going to eat them? You going to freeze them? Are you going to preserve them? Are you going to share them with others? Are the animals going to get them? A squirrel is going to get them. That's why I quit doing peaches a long time ago because the squirrels just pulled them off my tree before I can get them.

Chip East

I always ask people, again, what are you going to do with it? Now we know how many you need. Now we know how many trees to plant. I don't know to you tell me how much you want to eat. Are you trying to sell or provide food for the neighborhood or what? And then we can help you more about how many to plant. But freeze and preserve and share with others. Those are good reasons to grow your own. And I love those reasons and everything. So yeah, we always eat what you can free and preserve the rest.

Shane Harris

And it's also, you know, good it's a good hobby. A lot of people just like having backyard fruit. They enjoy the flowers in the spring. They love going out there and just picking, eating fresh muscadines or some, some fresh figs. It's just becomes a hobby. Can be fun! That can also be some frustrations too, now, because any kind of garden has a challenge. But there's always good. There's always the bad.

Chip East

Well, it's like fishing. That's a hobby, but you like it when you catch a bunch. When you got the, the vegetables or fruit or what. As a hobby, when you're growing something, we want to be productive. We're not just out there in the sun working for nothing. We want, we want production.

Shane Harris

What type of fruit should you grow? There's several things that you want to think about. You know, we're talking before this. You know, know what your objectives are. If this is a going to be, hobby farm, is it going to be a business and then know your limitations. And we want to say this up front, growing fruits is a lot of labor. There's a lot of work involved. This is an investment. And so as we as we talk to this podcast, and give you some ideas to think about, some tips to go forward when you're choosing these crops and then deciding what you want to grow, know how much space and time and effort you want to put into this. It may be easier to just go buy them.

Chip East

Everybody's different and what they want. Again, we're growing it. I think freshness is why, but just because we like to eat it, we can go buy it from somebody else that does all this work to eat it. And there's nothing wrong with that. Great farmers does a wonderful job of providing food for us to eat. Wonderful thing. But what are we trying to accomplish? It might be just to keep, you know, kids busy. Give them a job in the summertime. There's reasons. But I'm, I'm on the commercial side. So I mean, to me is the farmer that it can be a job and to make money. But if we're just trying to feed ourself all year or we just trying to supplement a little bit of strawberries for a little while, we don't realize we eat all the time. And sometimes if you're trying to provide all the food you eat, that is a lot of fruit. If we're doing vegetables, a lot of vegetables, and all, and you might not be wanting to put in that kind of time. And that's kind of about the limitations. It's like, well, my little girl could eat an acre of strawberries. I don't know if she could eat an acre, but she can't eat a lot. But that is a lot to tend to and very expensive to plant.

Shane Harris

You gotta understand, we talked about pruning in the prior podcast, this time of year people do a lot of pruning, even on the fruit trees. And if you have a lot of apples and peach and muscadines and figs and blueberries, that's a lot of time and effort to get ready for the next season. So, if you don't have time for that, or if you don't have the physical ability to do that or don't have the, the knowledge and experience, we'll try to give you the knowledge education, but just know that that's there's a lot of labor before you get to that harvest.

Chip East

One time we was doing a pruning workshop and, I was pruning, a kind of a before and after. So before people got there, was doing some pruning and a me and another one of our coworkers, we were pruning this muscadine and we both knew what we were doing. So, we're pruning. Took us an hour to prune one plant. Well, what if you had ten of them? So okay, that's 20 hours of if you was doing it by yourself. So it'd be two different days and things like that to prune.

Shane Harris

So always start, start small. You can always expand, later on. But you may not need ten peach trees. You may not need 20 blueberry plants. You may not need, you know, five, six, seven muscadines. And you may not have a space either.

Chip East

Yeah. We just, it just takes time. Whatever it is, I don't care if you buy a new car. Now we got a change oil in it. Now we have we got to take care of it. And same thing with our fruit.

Shane Harris

So choosing the crop and this is really what we want to emphasize here, for especially the Deep South. We're in Alabama. And so there are lot of things that we're going to refer to is the climate here in Alabama. And one thing is that what do you see growing in the grocery store may not be what can grow in Alabama.

There's very few varieties that and cultivars that we would recommend that may match the, the farmers market or the or the national grocery stores. Is it will adapted? Is it going to be able to deal with our Alabama heat? The humidity, cold... doesn't sometimes get cold enough for some crops. Drought. We have a lot of drought in Alabama. It's hot in August. You know, are there going to be disease and insects that attack those? There's always something that wants to eat that fruit more than you do. If it's... if it's a bug, or if it's a squirrel or if it's a crow or whatever. There's always something after those fruit. So those are those are things that you got to think about. Plus, spraying... you like those peaches... you got to spray to get a crop.

Chip East

And we do like to eat them. And I'm not. I guess it depends on what you're used to. We grow a lot of blackberries in the South. They grow a lot of raspberries in the North; we can grow raspberries. I'm not saying we can't, but they don't like our heat. Well, I know a lot of people who's grown them and we can grow them. I do not... I don't want to say we can't grow, but I'd certainly put blackberries ahead of that, as far as adapted to the South. We have a hard time growing cherries. That's not something I would put high on my list. I've grown pineapples before. I mean, they have to be protected, but it's a long process growing a pineapple.

I don't know that I would get in that business being here, because there it can be grown in other places and shipped easy. So, again, the crops, that's easy, adapted for us. That's kind of going to be the one that grows the best.

Shane Harris

Yeah. And that's going to be peaches, nectarines, apples, blueberries, blackberries, figs, muscadines, some bunch grapes. So that's... that's going to be majority of the things that we, we have in Alabama.

Chip East

Yeah. And I hate the spraying thing. They all... in the South we have insects and disease. And you're right. There, there are some things that a lot of people say I don't want to spray. Well, there's certain things that don't require a lot of spraying. And that's just something upfront we need to talk about. Do we... like blueberries and muscadines. And a lot of times we don't spray those at all; a homeowner wouldn't at all.

Shane Harris

General rules... small fruits are a lot easier than the tree fruits... when it comes to a spray schedule. And labor.

Chip East

Absolutely.

Shane Harris

So, think about... think about that. If you going back to having time and your limitations, are you going to have the time and the finances to spray on a regular basis just to get a handful of fruit?

Chip East

If we start off spraying and then we get busy and miss a few sprays, it's hard to go back. That... that spray - the fungicide may be a, in a way, a protective coating, but once that disease starts, you can't stop it. It's already started now, so we got to keep up with that once we start.

Shane Harris

So once you decide... you're thinking about kind of fruit you're interested in growing, you have something in mind. You know, you think about maybe how much fruit you want to produce. You've considered the, the weather here in the Deep South, especially the state of Alabama. And you think about all the time and effort and finances, the space that you need. You gotta have full sun from a site selection. Okay. You've got to have full sun to grow fruits. That's... that's number one.

Chip East

That's number one in... in someone will say, well it... it gets full sun at 10 o'clock and it's in the sun until two. I do not consider... I consider that partial shade. We know it needs to be sun from sunup to sundown. It needs to be in the sun. If we're growing fruit.

Shane Harris

And we worry about those late spring frosts, those beautiful peaches begin to bloom out... and boom here comes March. That's one reason we call it Blackberry Winter for a reason. We get a cold spell, seems like around Easter. And a lot of times those... those fruit varieties will get hurt and, so in the full sun, it could be good, but you could avoid those, frost pockets.

Chip East

Yeah. The cold settles in low areas. So, if I'm planting fruit, I want my fruit on the side of a hill. The cold goes... drains down to the low spots. So, we could put vegetables in the low spot and we could just delay planting. But the fruit, when it's blooming, it's very susceptible to the cold. And a lot of people say, well, I'll put it on... what about the south side of the hill or the north side of the hill? Well, it depends. I like either one, fine. But on the south side, if they're blooming and you have a cold, it might be protected from the hill. So that's good if it's on the south side. But if it's on the north side, a lot of people like that, because, well, it's on the north side, it stays cold, it delayed blooming. But... it all depends on the years. Some years one will work and not another. But, a sloping hill is what I like.

Shane Harris

Chip and I mentioned that, you know there can be a lot of challenges of growing fruits or some are a lot easier than others. But even when things go right, you have good weather, you have good site, you've got the right variety. There's always a... the risk of a problem occurring.

Chip East

And if it was easy, everybody would do it. It's hard! I mean, that's... that's farming can be tough. So, yeah, there's a lot of problems. And the thing that I worry about the most or things, it's out of our control and weather is a lot of it. And we can talk rain and that's a problem too. But, if we have a lot of rain, a lot of times we build our beds, like for blueberries, for instance, on a raised bed. So we need internal drainage... like a heavy, heavy clay drains poorly. Well, we can improve that, we can make a mound like a raised bed, and yes, we can improve our drainage. That is something we're in control of. We're not in control of how much rain we get, but we can... let it roll off the site better if we do our site selection again with raised beds. Well, if you're in a drought, there's something I can do about that. I can provide irrigation to that. And I wouldn't plant anything, especially a farmer, if I didn't... usually use drip irrigation, but I would put irrigation by that crop. I would actually have my irrigation... the well, the stream, whatever, water to the field before I even set the crop out. Because I've seen people set it out and then worry about drilling a well. Well, it dies in the meantime. So I would want my water... ready, before I even set the crops. Those are things we're in charge of. And that's exactly right.

Shane Harris

That late spring frost, though, is probably the big thing that always hits the media. We read about that. Everybody's concerned about the peach crop being frozen there in March. You got strawberries... they get, suddenly get attacked, not attacked, you know, hurt by the cold. Then the whole crop is ruined!

Chip East

It, you know, when that bloom dies, it won't bloom. Now if a full bloom hasn't opened yet... that can be saved. But when that thing opens, it's not going to... That bloom is gone for the year. And... that is something we're very concerned with. And again, the farmer plants on the hill or hillside and that's all good. We can use row covers to actually cover, frost blankets is another term, but we're just covering the... works a lot good with strawberries for instance. It's done a lot like blueberries and tree fruits. It pokes holes. It's like a blanket we're putting over the crop. I mean, that works. It's just on woody type things. Those row covers cost money. And anyway, it works very good with strawberries. But, with the tree fruits, a lot of times we use water, you know, energy is released when water freezes. And that that's done a lot. And certain crops, again, peaches bloom early. Blueberries are a lot of fruit crop is early. Well, I've been doing blueberries a long time. There's early, mid and late season blueberries in like, southern high bush blooms early. I like them. They're one of my favorite, blueberries. Its southern highbush... thin skin. Boy, it's good! Good, good quality fruit! But they bloom early. Well, I plant them, don't misunderstand. We plant them... but the cold gets them a lot, too. So, the rabbiteyes bloom later, and maybe the cold don't get them. But even the later rabbiteyes, some of them are blooming while the others are tight in the bud. What if you had a cold come in at that point in time, the one that's tight in the bud might still make a fruit, but the one that's blooming is injured by the cold. So, I don't say we can avoid the potential problems. We got the problems! Cause just because the cold won't get you today, it can get you in a week when the other one's blooming. But these are things we do to help.

Shane Harris

And the... the frustration is when you have a good season, good spring, you missed the frost. Then you got to worry about the disease and insects that come in the summer. And those tree fruits specifically have a lot of disease, have a lot of insects. And so, Chip and I will recommend a home orchard spray or fruit spray. A lot of times, those products are good to just spray every 10 days or 14 days based on the label. If you're a commercial grower, farmer, you may separate those out into multiple applications. But if you want those fruits Chip, you got to spray because the bugs and disease will wipe you out.

Chip East

And it all depends on the quality of fruit you want and you know, peaches, for instance, is different than blueberries that that when we talk about spraying. But yeah, fungicides on peach we generally spray might be every 10 to 14 days for a homeowner. The farmer may spray more often, but it's got to be a perfect crop.

Shane Harris

And it starts day one. As soon as the blooms begin to fade. You've got to start that application.

Chip East

There are certain things... like, we'll spray for, scale for instance. We'll do a dormant oil spray and we'll spray that in January or February. We'll spray twice, if not three times maybe. Well, we'll start with our fungicides, like when we see, like pink in the bloom. It's actually even before the blooms open. We'll start with a fungicide on for instance, peach trees. Now insects, a lot of times we're scouting and we're looking for an insect either

damage or the bug itself. But the disease is too late. Once you see it with your eye, it's already... a problem. So we'll do that preventative and spray early.

Shane Harris

Chip, let's now turn our attention to going shopping. We've seen all these pretty pictures. Hey, we get an advertisement. We get a seed catalog. We see an online photo of a beautiful blueberry that's delicious... peaches and apples. Oh, I think I want to grow those! We go to the nursery, we go to an online catalog source, we go to a retail store. You know, what, now I have decided. Hey, I want an apple. Want a peach or a muscadine? How do we know what to get?

Chip East

Good question. And we've got a lot of research reports that will recommend certain varieties for our area. So wherever you are in the country, the Extension office, your local office can provide you with information. These are the peaches recommended for this part of the state. This is the blueberries recommended for this part of the state. You see what I mean? And just because you got a friend in two states over that say this is the best, I don't know strawberry. Well, I'm sure it is. That's good for them. But for us that might not work. So I would look at those things, research porch where people have actually it's been grown. And we do know through research trials.

Shane Harris

One of those... throw some vocabulary words at you, is pollination. Do I need one? Do I need two for this particular crop? So let's talk about cross pollination and self-pollination. If you have apples and blueberries, kiwifruit, pears, plums, even certain type of muscadines that are typically female, you always have, have a cross it to have at least two, you know, male and female, to get that cross pollination.

Chip East

And it's easy for me to say for any crop. I love cross pollination. I like to have more than one of different, we call them cultivars, or we can say varieties. In certain things you have to have cross pollination for...it's the quality of fruit. In this case, well, I'll just mention blueberry... but it can be anything. Better cross pollination results in the bigger berry. Okay, well, that one reason would make me want to have cross pollination. Now, there's other reasons why I would like the cross pollination or different varieties. I'll say that. Early, mid and late season, in the case of blueberries, I want 2 or 3 early. They're cross-pollinate amongst themselves. 2 or 3 mid 2 or 3 late. Now, I'm not saying a mid-season couldn't pollinate an early one or a late one. But I like to have a couple early couple or more. Couple of mid couple of late. Well, this extends our berry picking season. So one we're helping on the cross pollination. But two I can pick berries early in the year to late in the year, even though this one over here is my favorite. But if it's early, you know, for the rest of the year after it's gone, I can't eat that anymore. So I love having different ones. Things that do require, sometimes just flat out require it, you know, apple, blueberry, pecan, kiwifruit, pears, plums, certain muscadines, female muscadines. See we can have self-fertile muscadines, but let's just say muscadines. I like them cross-pollinated. But, peaches, you can have the whole field of the same kind of peach. You know, they're self-pollination.

Shane Harris

A lot of us ask about... hey, only got room for one plant too. So, if you have something itself pollinated, you know, you could have just a fig. You could just have a, a citrus—lemon, satsuma, lime. You could have that one peach tree that you talked about. If you got room in the backyard, maybe on a small piece of property. So that's... that's an advantage. When they're self-pollinated.

Chip East

Blackberries. Citrus. That's right. We could have one. However, there's a lot you can. These nurseries that sell them will graft another tree on to it. Like if you wanted apple, you got room for one, we could graft 3 or 4 more than that. Different apple varieties onto one tree. So even though there's room for one tree, we can have several apples and we wouldn't have to worry about our pollination then.

Shane Harris

Other things to consider. If you talk to a reputable nursery, about selecting fruits is chill hours, rootstocks. Now we're getting real technical on some things, but we want to make sure listeners understand this. And we have these references. There's publications that definitely go in more detail about this. You got to make sure you have the right chill hours. Chip, what does that mean?

Chip East

And it's chill hours are important for certain crops. So, some of them require very little chilling. And it's no big deal. Others require more. And that's where it's important. The chill hour is measured as the amount of time trees are exposed to cool temperatures. Well, 43 degrees might be the perfect hour. 43 is a chill hour, but we can be above freezing a little. We could be around 50 or better and and get some chilling. But those are the times we're looking for. And if you have a week of temperatures at 20 degrees, you may get zero chilling for those that week. It's because we're too cold, we don't get the chilling. And then if you get temperatures hitting in the 70s the next day, it can erase chilling that we had the last 24 to 36 hours. So there's a lot of different, as you might imagine, models or formulas for calculating chill hours. We keep up with here. There's a website we have that, that lists the different models. And here's the chilling we had. We can look up ten years ago, 20 years ago. Here's the chilling we had this day last year. And we compared this day to last year. But if you look up, go to our website type in "chill hours", all that information is there. We want to match, for instance, if you have a peach you love... And when I really think about it, when think about peaches. That's a 850 chill hour peach. I do not want to plant that in a location that receives a 1,000 chill hours or 1200 chill hours. It's going to want to bloom once it gets its chilling and it's waiting on a warm day. And so, if you have a low chilling plant and you're in a certain location, people call, say, "hey, I got this tree... it's blooming in January every year." I know the chill hours is wrong.

Shane Harris

Yeah, that peach was designed more for south Alabama, not north Alabama.

Chip East

Absolutely.

Shane Harris

And so it blooms early. So if people see these peaches and pears bloom in early when it may be still February or March, then you know, that's more of a, a low chilling hour fruit tree. That's not the good variety that you want in this area. And you're going to get killed by frost every year.

Chip East

And it may taste good. That peach that your friend in the South Alabama has in their yard may be a wonderful peach, but it wouldn't do well for someone in North Alabama, for instance.

Shane Harris

And the next thing to consider, especially if you're getting fruit trees, is rootstock. Because the people always want to ask us about size of the tree, the varieties, and even if they see this on plant tags: "dwarf apple", "dwarf peach". Now, that's being dictated by the rootstock. Most people don't understand this, but size of that tree is dictated by what kind of rootstock it is on.

Chip East

Years ago we had trees on.. people say, "are they own their own roots" or it depends on the, the plant. But these big, I'll just say apples. You don't want that fruit. They want to be hand-picked. If they hit the ground and bruise, that's not good. Later people don't want to buy that. So they want to be hand picked. Well, if it's a big tree? It's harder to hand pick. So they put them on a dwarfing rootstock. And there's so many different rootstocks. We could talk about that one day, but so many different rootstocks. It might be... this one may be 75% of a standard tree or 50%, or some can be less than that. We actually put them on trellis; they're small. And well, what we do for the farmer, the trees are smaller so we can put them closer together. We get about the same production per acre, but you don't have to pay employees to climb up and down ladders all day. Think about that. And so for the homeowner, same thing I mean it's a... it's a smaller tree. So maybe we don't get as much production, but we can plant a couple of them.

Shane Harris

Do your homework when it comes to the size of the trees. Know the variety, the cultivar, and also know what rootstock there on. Because you don't want to invest in a tree, you know, long-term; it's going to take a while. When you can. It gets too big or too short. So make sure you do your homework in that regard.

Chip East

And I will say those trees that are grafted, you always see, might be crooked at the bottom, if it was budded. But we grow a tree a rootstock, and then we cut it and put another tree... the red delicious or some apple, some plant we like on that. So we got two different trees in one. Well, that's why they cost more money when it's been grafted. Nothing wrong with that, I mean, somebody had to work harder to get it. So yes, they're more money, but there's benefits of having other rootstocks. In the case of peaches, for instance, there's nematode

resistant rootstocks. You see what I mean? There's, if it's ornamentals, there's roses that have a better rootstock or camellias. This camellia would have a better rootstock. So we're grafting it. So there's a reason for doing that. And it's a good reason. That's why nurseries do it, it's not just to charge you money. They've got more money invested in it but it's for your benefit.

Shane Harris

Yeah. Just think about rootstocks as this. So you've seen full grown big apple trees and you've seen trellis apples. Those are on different rootstocks that are dictating the height and the use. And typically a smaller tree typically produces faster than, say, the standard big, big, big apple tree that may take five years to produce apples.

Chip East

Depends on the tree. There's a particular pear that I like, and I like it because it's fireblight resistant. Well, that pear takes a long time to produce and is grafted.

Shane Harris

Folks, there's a lot to come to selecting fruits that you want to grow in your home, backyard, your home orchard, or there on your farm. We've hope we've at least tapped into some of those questions and dug deep into selecting fruits. If you need more information about growing fruits, reach out to your local county Extension office. We have lots of resources on our website. That's with the Alabama Cooperative Extension System. And you can learn more, watch videos, contact your Extension office for more information about growing fruits. Chip, enjoyed talking with you today here on *Southern Ground*. Looking forward to a future episode where we dig deeper into some of your topics, your questions that you may have. We're going to try to address those throughout this podcast on future episodes. Chip, good to see you today.

Chip East

Absolutely, Shane. Thank you.

Announcer

Southern Ground has been a production of Alabama Extension at Auburn University.