

Care Sheet for Pears

Care Upon Arrival

Potted plants can be planted in the soil at anytime of the year, as long as the ground is not frozen. If it is hot summer, the plants will need to be watered twice weekly if it is dry. If you are not ready to plant yet, the plant should be fine kept near a front door where it can get light and you can keep an eye on it. Keep the potted plant watered, making sure the soil stays moist, but not sodden or overly soaked (don't leave it in standing water in a bucket or pond for more than a few hours or its roots will begin to die). If any part of the plant is broken from shipping, it is best to prune that piece off where the break occurred. Make sure to NOT cut a fruit tree off below its graft union (marked with a splotch of paint)—below this is only rootstock which will not produce quality fruit. If the plant is broken below the graft union, immediately splint and wrap it so it is rejoined, using scraps of plastic bag and rubber bands, or any type of tape should work. Using a piece of a stick and taping that well below and above the break should hold things in place until the wound heals over.

General Information

are a very beautiful and easy to grow fruit tree! They do very well even in poor, clay rich soils and send deep roots well into the ground to keep themselves well anchored. Pears like as much sun as they can get, but can fruit even with half-day's worth of sun. Most pears require a separate variety for proper pollination; however in most urban and even suburban areas, many of the ornamental pears people have planted can sometimes pollinate your single pear tree. If you want to be certain, plant two varieties. Blooms occur in the early spring, covering the tree in beautiful white! Fruit follows the blooms, with a wide range in size, firmness and flavor. Ripening time is anywhere from late summer through fall, depending on the variety. Pears can take a little bit of time, sometimes a year or two to get their roots established in the soil, so don't give up on them if they don't seem to grow very fast their first two years. After this time, they usually get going and make as much as 24" of growth each year thereafter.

Planting

Pears are put on a semi-dwarf rootstock which will limit the growth to approximately 14' tall by 12' wide. Plan for this mature size when you pick your planting spot (it's very easy to forget your tiny tree will get to be this big). Keep 14-18' of space between the spots you are planting your pears. If your soil is very compacted from construction or lots of walking traffic, take some time to loosen the soil to 24" deep by 3' diameter before planting your pear. When you do plant it, carefully dig a hole that is the same size as the pot. Slide the pear out carefully from its pot and set it into the hole you dug, slightly below the level it was in the pot. Now lightly firm the soil around the tree with your hands or foot so the plant can't rock back and forth easily. Always apply mulch of some sort (see below). Now with a hose or watering can, water the tree generously. Make sure the tree gets a good watering twice a week for its first year in the ground, either from a rain, or from you watering if it does not

rain. Do not water if the weather is already wet! This can drown out the roots from too much water.

Pruning

Pears will continue to bear fruit if not pruned, but they will look gangly and the fruit will be much smaller than usual. They might also resort to a biennial bearing cycle (fruit only every other year). Pruning pears is best done in late winter when the buds are just beginning to swell (February thru early March here in southern Indiana). In the first and second years, prune very little off, except for any dead branches and certainly prune off any growth below the graft line (the rootstock can very quickly outgrow the grafted part in the first few years). Select one more vigorous and upright shoot to become the “central leader”. This will be the future “trunk” of your tree, with branches radiating off to the sides. Keeping this central leader in mind, prune side branches starting the third year, aiming to keep clusters of three to five branches evenly spaced around the tree, with approximately 2-3’ of space vertically between clusters of branches. Pears like to sprout up lots of vertical growth (water sprouts) and these make lousy side branches, so try to select branches that shoot out a little more to the side. Generally, I remove all water sprouts, and this forces the growth out to the side more. Let the side branches mostly unpruned unless things get pretty tangly—then prune out enough to loosen up the branch. Always keep fruiting “spurs” (short thick stubs with buds on them) on the trunk and branches—these are where most fruit is borne upon.

Fertilizing and Mulching

Never put fertilizer into the hole when you are planting the tree! It is best to wait until the second year to begin fertilizing fruit trees. Mulching right away with material like wood chips, bark mulch, grass clippings, spoiled hay, straw, even shredded paper will do wonders for your tree (synthetic mulches like rubber or plastic will only keep the soil moist). Mulch keeps the soil moist during dry spells, wicks the water away during wet weather, and breaks down into wonderful black rich humus that enriches the soil. No rototilling needed! Just keep adding more mulch material each year, starting with a 3’ diameter circle at planting, and expanding the circle so it falls at the edges (drip line) of the branches as they grow outward. Keep a clear area of about 3” around the trunk, so rots and rodents do not nibble the wood. Starting the second year, it is good to add some sort of fertilizer on top of the ground (or old mulch) before you add new mulch. Keep the fertilizer in a circle near the drip line of the tree—this is where its feeder roots are. Manure is best, as it has a fairly balanced nutrient load, and it encourages soil life. Only apply a layer 1” thick, in a 1’ wide band, and put mulch on top of this. The soil will do the rest of the work incorporating it into the ground and making it available to plants. If using synthetic fertilizer, always go with the instructions on the package. For a tree treat, find some kelp meal at a local garden center or from an organic farmer, and sprinkle some of this around the drip line every 3-5 years. Note: if you are using hay with a good clover or alfalfa in it, there is no need to add manure! Watch your tree to see if you are using too much or too little fertilizer. It will send out water sprouts over 24” long if you are using too much (and it won’t fruit very much) and it will stay very small, growing

little or not at all if you are using too little.

Fruiting

Pears will fruit for you with little or no attention. However, with a little extra care, the fruit will be bigger, have less “stones” in it, and you will get more of it every year. To get larger fruit, thin the fruits that set after the flowers drop in the spring—when they are marble-sized, go and pick all but 1-3 fruits off from each cluster and compost the rest of the fruits you pick off. To avoid insect stings which cause gritty spots in the flesh, I recommend using a natural product called Surround™, a wettable clay that you spray on the tree every two weeks. Most pears will not ripen well on the tree, but should be picked while still a little hard and ripened indoors in paper bags until soft (you can keep the hard pears in a refrigerator or cool basement and pull a few out each week into your heated space to ripen for you). A good method to tell when the pears are ready to pick is this: First, push hard with your thumb near the stem end of the pear—if it gives a little, they are probably ready. Then, pick one off the tree, cut it open with a knife and look at the seeds. If they are dark colored, the pears are ready, if they are still white or mostly white, wait a little longer. Also, try eating a slice of this fruit—if it is somewhat tasty and has some sweetness, they are ready—if they are flavorless are just sour, they’re not. Asian pears are an exception—they ripen on the tree and are crunchy like an apple even when ripe. Pick these when they taste good!