



*The orchard during the first season, with a mature apple tree in the background*

I'm not sure when the idea first surfaced, but it was a dream of mine to grow an orchard in my urban backyard (Canadian zone 5a, American zone 4). I did so in 2011, starting with six trees, five of which remained healthy throughout the first season. The sixth was girdled, perhaps by a rabbit, even though I had protected it up to 18". Nonetheless, I attribute the success of the other trees to the site we chose. It receives full sun for much of the day, and a nearby hedge provides wind protection but is far enough away that it doesn't compete with the trees.

I created the plot using the lasagna-gardening technique. It's a no-dig method in which you cover the area with damp newspapers that smother the grass, weeds, etc., and then add layers of organic matter to create a garden bed. After I laid the newspaper, I added a layer of coarse material (shrub clippings from pruning), followed by a thick layer of rich loam from three old composters that contained a lot of good material. The first season, we used the bed as a vegetable garden and it provided excellent crops. The second season, when we planted the orchard in it, some fairly vigorous digging was required because of the heavy clay soil. The site is on a slight incline, so I started at the top with a 3' x 18' trench perpendicular to the slope. I excavated to a depth of 12" and loosened an additional 6".

## A Labor Of Love: My Own Orchard

### Selecting the Trees

There are many factors to consider when planting any tree, let alone one you want to fruit. Hardiness and disease resistance are two of the most important; however, mature size, pruning needs, drought resistance, whether or not the tree is self-fertile and age until first fruiting are also important. I planted six fruit trees, the first of which were two apricots, *Prunus mandshurica* 'Scout' and 'Morden 604', both developed in Morden, Manitoba. They are extremely hardy and disease resistant. I purchased the trees in pots, which are usually easy to remove without disturbing the roots too much. I did loosen the bottom part of each soil ball to encourage root spread. (A little disturbance is okay.) After digging extra-deep holes near each end of the trench, I placed coarse material at the bottom, positioned the trees, and backfilled the holes with existing soil layered with manure and compost. I created a saucer around each tree for rain catchment, and the trench provided an additional rainwater reservoir.



*The author created trenches and saucers around each tree for water catchment.*

I dug my second 3' x 18' trench and introduced a Stella cherry tree (*Prunus avium* 'Stella') and an Ure pear tree (*Pyrus ussuriensis* 'Ure') to their new home. Each was planted in the same way as the apricots. I bought the more mature Ure "field dug and root-pruned", which meant it was a fairly big tree on a relatively small root ball. It needed temporary staking, which I removed by late summer. Staking is not recommended beyond the first year and not at all if the tree is small.

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I subsequently purchased a partner pear tree, a Bartlett (*Pyrus communis* 'Bartlett'), which I planted next to a third trench. Unfortunately, this tree was damaged by rabbits. To find a replacement, I contacted a nursery that specialized in fruit trees and received two very hardy pear trees, (*P. communis*) 'So Sweet' and 'Northbrite'. Usually pear trees are not self fertile, but 'So Sweet' happens to be. I expect both to start producing fruit at a young age.

### Maintenance

To protect the trees against our blustery winter, I double wrapped the trunks with spiral plastic and fine-mesh wire, and added outer circles of fine-mesh chicken wire and some stiff fine-mesh wire around each. The coverings are easily unfastened for pruning purposes. Three stout stakes and metal garden staples at the base stabilize each of these circles.

All of the trees received special attention during the first season in terms of watering and fertilizing. As a result, they were in good shape, despite the long dry spell we experienced during that summer. (We collected water in barrels and siphoned it from a main barrel to a free-standing one near the orchard.) Fertilization consisted of regular top-ups of manure or compost. The last application, which we laid just before the fences went up, included a bit of bone meal.

During the first season, a brief visit from some Japanese beetles made me anxious, but I picked regularly and as a result there was little damage. The 'Ure' suffered a partially broken and twisted branch during a particularly strong windstorm. I tended to it, and the branch is still very much alive. 'Stella' was a slow starter and needed extra nursing to acclimatize to its new location.



The Dolgo crabapple tree (*Malus domestica* 'Dolgo') that occupied the spot vacated by the 'Bartlett', was by far the tallest by the end of the season, even though it had been in the ground the least amount of time. It benefited from the abundant rainfall we received later in the season. I have always loved this particular crabapple. Even if you never eat its tart fruit, it is a winner. It's hardy and disease resistant, and has lovely blossoms and gorgeous red fruit

*An easy solution in a difficult space*

## **A Labor Of Love: My Own Orchard**

I did not have a clear plan for groundcover between trees, it just happened. My vegetable allotment was filled with other plants, so my Siberian blue potato sprouts went in between the fruit trees. The potato vines formed an excellent groundcover, nearly eliminating the need to weed. They produced a great crop too. I had successfully overwintered sweet potato vines, which yielded more cuttings than I needed. What I didn't give away ended up in the space between the second and third tier of fruit trees. More ground cover! At the lower end of the orchard, a pile of pumpkin seeds that I had buried with other kitchen compost sent up shoots to yield even more cover and four nice medium-sized pumpkins.



*The author's orchard — just as she had always dreamed it.*

I finally had the orchard I had been waiting for. Here are a few tips for other gardeners who dream of having their own backyard orchard:

- Buy local, if possible. It saves on shipping costs and supports local businesses.
- Buy potted plants, which provide more flexibility regarding planting times. (They'll need extra water while they wait to be planted.)
- Do your research.
- Don't despair. Rabbits have to eat too.

*Text and photos by Edythe Falconer*

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