

Selecting peach and nectarine varieties for the Willamette Valley

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Most Willamette Valley peaches are sold on the farm directly to consumers for home canning and freezing or at a nearby roadside market or farmers market. Despite production difficulties, peaches remain the most popular summer fruit at roadside stands and in U-pick orchards.

The climate in Oregon's Willamette Valley is characterized by mild, wet winters, with heavy rainfall in the spring tapering off to nearly nothing in July and August. Peaches grown in this climate must be protected from diseases such as peach leaf curl, coryneum blight, bacterial canker, and brown rot. Peach trees also often require protection from insect pests such as the peach tree borer and the peach twig borer.



Peaches are popular at roadside stands throughout the Willamette Valley.

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Unless you protect your trees adequately, diseases and insects can damage them severely or kill them. See [Pest management guide for peaches](https://extension.oregonstate.edu/catalog/pub/em-8419-2023-pest-management-guide-peaches), (<https://extension.oregonstate.edu/catalog/pub/em-8419-2023-pest-management-guide-peaches>) EM 8419, for current pest management recommendations.

Peach bloom can begin during the last week of February and continue into early April. Bloom may extend over a four- to five-week period for a given variety. From dormant buds, the bloom stages are as follows: prebloom, popcorn, full bloom, petal fall, and shuck split to shuck fall.

Most peach varieties are selffruitful; they do not require pollination by another compatible variety. This trait is fortunate because bee activity, which is necessary for cross-pollination, can be limited by cool weather in early spring.

Orchards located 100 feet or more above the valley floor are subject to less fog and frost and to cooler temperatures. Some peach varieties bear more consistently on such sites than on the river bottom or first bench (the first elevation rise off the valley floor).

Unfortunately, irrigation water often is not available at higher elevations. Although peach trees can be grown on deep soils without irrigation, they must be irrigated for maximum fruit size and production.

Peach trees usually are grown on peach seedling rootstocks and are spaced about 20 feet apart on the square, giving 108 trees per acre. Spacing trees at 14 by 20 feet (155 trees per acre) or even closer also is feasible. However, with close spacing, you must prune trees more heavily and more frequently to prevent overcrowding, maintain production, increase fruit size and prevent tree breakage.

Peach varieties

Most customers know the name Elberta. Many know Redhaven, and a few recognize Veteran as one of the most common peach varieties in the Willamette Valley. However, because of numerous breeding programs around the United States and Canada, several new peach varieties are as good as, or better than, these early introductions.

Although hundreds of peach varieties have been tested in the Willamette Valley, only a few are grown here commercially. For the most part, these varieties tend to bear more regularly than others. You can overlook a peach's inferior qualities if it bears fruit every year!

The following varieties are listed in order of ripening. The approximate harvest dates are for the mid- to north Willamette Valley. The time of harvest can be as much as 1 to 2 weeks earlier in the southern end of the Valley, especially for mid- to late-maturing varieties. In general, early varieties tend to be smaller and less sweet than later varieties, and they also have more split pits. Unless otherwise noted, all of the listed varieties have similar levels of resistance to the main peach diseases.

Performance of peach varieties can differ from one location to another, and from one year to the next. Evaluate new varieties in your own test plot before deciding which ones will best suit your needs.

Springcrest (mid-July)

The fruit are small to medium and round, with skin showing a red blush on yellow. The flesh is yellow, moderately firm, melting, and semifreestone when fully ripe. Quality is good. Springcrest is the earliest variety for the commercial drive-in trade, but don't plant too many; later varieties of better quality may follow soon after.

Gemfree (late July)

The fruit are large with a red-overyellow skin color. The flesh is yellow, meaty to melting, and freestone. Cropping can be heavy, with varying amounts of split pit from year to year.

Early Redhaven (late July)

Originated as a "sport" (mutation) of the popular variety Redhaven. Early Redhaven is reported to be a less reliable producer than Redhaven, with a tendency to split pits and coarser flesh. The flesh is yellow and semicling; the skin is red. Fruit are less pointed than Redhaven's, but the tree resembles Redhaven. Very few Early Redhaven trees are grown in the Willamette Valley.

Harbelle (late July)

Produces large, round fruit with a red blush on yellow skin. The flesh is firm, melting, yellow, slow to brown, and freestone, and it has good flavor. The tree is small, cold-hardy, of moderate vigor, and a consistent producer.

Sunhaven (early August)

Produces uniformly shaped, medium-size fruit that are nearly round. The skin is bright red over golden, and the flesh is yellow flecked with red. Sunhaven is freestone when fully ripe and resembles Redhaven. The fruit have good flavor and fine, firm texture; they resist browning. The tree is large, vigorous, and consistently productive. Less thinning is necessary than for other varieties because the tree will support a large number of fruit.

Redhaven (early August)

Once was the most extensively planted freestone-type peach in the world. Fruit size is medium if the tree is well thinned. The fruit are round with a prominent suture and apex (tip). Skin is yellow overlaid with red; flesh is yellow with red around the pit. The fruit are firm, fine textured, melting, and almost freestone when fully ripe, but the pits are difficult to remove (which discourages some canners), and the skin tends to tear easily during harvest. This variety has outstanding flavor when fresh or frozen. Redhaven can have excessive split pits, and it is susceptible to brown rot blossom and fruit rot.

The tree is vigorous and a consistently heavy bearer, except when there is spring frost. In favorable years, Redhaven sets very heavy crops that require extensive thinning. Redhaven trees also need heavy pruning to obtain the best possible fruit color. There are various mutant strains of Redhaven in the nursery trade. Oregon growers recommend the Michigan strain.

Harken (early August)

The fruit are medium to large, and the skin is yellow overlaid with red blush. The flesh is yellow, firm, juicy, and almost smooth, with a sweet, rich flavor. It is freestone and slow to brown. The tree is productive, moderately vigorous, and cold-hardy.

Redtop (early August)

Produces large fruit that are nearly round except for a pointed apex. The skin is yellow with a red blush; the flesh is yellow, very firm, and fine grained. Redtop is good canned or frozen. It's the first true freestone of the growing season. The tree is willowy, and the fruit hang on the tree for up to 10 days when ripe.

July Elberta (mid-August)

A Luther Burbank variety introduced by Stark Brothers in 1930, this variety also is known as Burbank Elberta and by several other names. It's often confused with the late-ripening variety called Early Elberta or Improved Elberta, because July Elberta also is called Early Elberta. July Elberta produces medium-size, round fruit. The skin has red streaks over yellow.

The fruit are firm and freestone. The flesh is yellow, with a slight reddening at the pit. In some seasons, however, the fruit can develop a dark, dull skin color, stringy flesh, and thick fuzz. July Elberta is a fairly reliable bearer in the Willamette Valley. It withstands handling comparatively well and is good for fresh consumption, freezing, or canning.

Fairhaven (mid-August)

The fruit are medium to large and round. The skin is yellow with red cheek (sides) and is smooth, but tough. The flesh is yellow, with red at the pit, very firm, and moderately fine textured. Fairhaven is freestone, resists browning, and has a good flavor, traits that make it ideal for freezing and canning.

Canadian Harmony (mid to late August)

Produces large, round fruit, mostly on the ends of branches. The skin is dull orange with dark red cheek. The flesh is yellow at the apex, changing to bright red-orange at the stem end, and freestone. It is firm and juicy with a distinct aroma. The skin tends to tear at the stem end when fruit are picked. The tree's excessive vigor results in a greater need for pruning than for many varieties.

Earlihale (mid- to late August)

Produces very large fruit with dark red skin. The flesh is yellow, firm, freestone, and has good flavor, but the fruit tend to crack. The tree requires a pollinizer. Choose another variety with a similar harvest time so that bloom times will be similar. Earlihale is susceptible to bacterial blight.

Suncrest (mid- to late August)

The fruit are large, round, firm, and attractive deep red on yellow. The flesh is firm, melting, deep red, and freestone, with good texture and flavor. Suncrest may be one of the best varieties for western Oregon growing conditions. Tree vigor is moderate, so trees are reasonably easy to prune. The open, pink bloom is distributed over the entire length of the limbs, and trees are consistently productive. Fruit flavor is excellent, and fruit are suitable for all kinds of processing. The firm flesh, deep red color, and eye appeal permit handling and promote sales in all types of fruit markets.

Loring (mid- to late August)

Produces large, yellow fruit that aren't as attractive as the red varieties. The flesh also is yellow, with red at the pit. It is freestone and has very good flavor. Loring is a reliable bearer and a satisfactory canner, although it is soft.

Glohaven (mid- to late August)

Has large, round fruit, with skin that is mostly red over deep yellow. The flesh is clear yellow, with almost no red in the pit cavity. The fruit are firm and freestone, resist browning, can and freeze well, and remain on the tree when mature.

Veteran (late August)

Because of its reliable productivity, this variety has become the principal peach of western Oregon. The fruit are medium to large and round-oblate (flattened on the end). The skin is yellow with very little red coloring; the flesh is yellow, soft, and semifreestone to freestone. Fruit peel easily without scalding and have a rich flavor when canned, but fresh eating quality is only fair. Fruit are soft when ripe and show bruises easily, so they do not hold up well in markets. The tree is vigorous and highly productive. This variety is most suitable for U-pick operations and home gardens.

Biscoe (mid-September)

Produces fruit that are medium to large, with a red-over-yellow skin color. The flesh is deep yellow to orange, with a fine to melting texture and good flavor. Fruit are freestone and more resistant to browning than Elberta. They remain on the tree once mature. Some growers favor Biscoe as a filler between Flamecrest and Elberta.

Improved Elberta (mid-September)

Introduced in 1907 and has great name familiarity. It also is known as Early Elberta, Gleason Elberta, Lemon Elberta, and Stark Early Elberta. Don't confuse Early Elberta with July Elberta, as the two varieties are quite different. Improved Elberta also is different from the standard Elberta, which seldom is grown in Oregon because it matures too late. Improved Elberta fruit have yellow skin with a red blush. The flesh is yellow, firm, freestone, and resists bruising. Fruit are good fresh, canned, or frozen, and they have a tangy flavor that's better than Elberta's.

Improved Elberta has name familiarity, and many customers ask for it; yet, many of the newer introductions have a better appearance. Improved Elberta does not compete well against redder varieties. It's a good producer, but it tends to drop fruit just before maturity. It matures so late that early rains increase the chance of brown rot. It is one of the few yellow varieties that ripen satisfactorily even when picked slightly green.

Nectarine varieties

Nectarines are peaches without fuzz. They usually are a little more difficult to grow than peaches. To produce blemish-free fruit, you must protect them from thrip damage during bloom.

Juneglo (mid-July)

The fruit are 60 percent red with some russetting. This variety sets fruit in cool, wet weather and is very precocious. It has 10 to 15 percent split pits and varying fruit size. Flesh is semifreestone when ripe.

Harko (late July)

This is a solid red, clingstone nectarine with good quality and flavor. It is a consistent producer, with no split pits. It tends to overbear, so it must be thinned hard and early in order to get good fruit size. The tree is vigorous, with a twiggy habit, which makes it more time-consuming to prune than other varieties.

Redgold (early August)

The skin is 80 to 90 percent red, and flesh is freestone. Fruit have high-quality, firm flesh with good flavor. Fruit set is modest, and fruit are large. The tree is vigorous and timeconsuming to prune.

Fantasia (mid-August)

The skin is solid red, and flesh is freestone, with excellent quality flavor and firmness. This variety is a consistent producer at several locations in the Willamette Valley.

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