

Eat a Peach

Local, old-style peaches replete with flavor

When I asked a peach-growing friend which variety has the best flavor, he scarcely gave me time to finish the sentence. "Sun Crest," he said. "Sun Crest," he repeated, shaking his head as though denying even the possibility of a contest. Sun Crest is a variety you'll never find in a supermarket. It's an old peach that's fragrant and bursting with flavor, and so juicy you almost need to eat it outside and take a shower afterwards.

Sun Crest is also a peach that doesn't suit today's mass market. It is golden yellow when ripe, rather than all red, the color that apparently signals ripeness to The Consumer. Worse still, it's a soft fleshed peach with almost no shelf-life. I first learned about Sun Crest peaches from *Epitaph for a Peach*, a poignant little book by David Mas Masumoto. It describes his efforts to save the last of his family's Sun Crest orchards from the bulldozer by converting to organic culture and searching for a specialized market niche. Fruit brokers told him to get rid of the trees. Better peaches have come along, they assured him, "peaches that have fuller color and last for months in storage." Well, that explains those red but mealy and tasteless things you so often get at the store.

'You have to manage your trees to get a successful crop — and they can produce every year if you do it right.' — TODD BERGER

If you are growing peaches for yourself and a few friends, you don't have to worry too much about shelf life. Todd Berger is a dedicated home gardener — he and his wife Annie grow half of their food. Their 48 fruit trees include many peaches and nectarines that ripen over a period of more than two months. Sun Crest is one of the later varieties to ripen, but by the time this goes to press he'll probably be harvesting Early Redhaven, his earliest peach. Standard Redhavens come in about two weeks later. The season closes in September with Elbertas.

Growing peaches and nectarines in this part of the world is not a piece of cake. The trees are susceptible to peach leaf curl and brown rot, two fungal diseases that are exacerbated by wet spring weather. Peach leaf curl thickens and distorts the leaves, which then discolor and fall off. It affects almost all peach trees that are not kept out of the rain, and it can be fatal to the tree. "If people want to grow peaches, they are going to have to spray," Berger told me. "You have to manage your trees to get a successful crop — and they

can produce every year if you do it right."

Berger begins his spray program with Bordeaux mixture (copper sulfate and lime) as soon as leaves turn and begin to drop in early fall. He repeats the process every six weeks for a total of three times during the winter. In spring he sprays with wettable sul-



The Sun Crest peach is fragrant and rich in flavor.

fur against brown rot, starting at full bloom and continuing every seven days until harvest. "Keep an eye on the fruit," he said, especially nectarines. The smooth skin makes them very susceptible to brown rot. He also uses Tanglefoot, applied on a band of plastic wrap, to stop ants crawling up the trunks.

Peaches and nectarines require more pruning than other fruit trees because they bear fruit on one-year old wood. *Sunset Western Garden Book* suggests removing as much as two-thirds of the growth each year to encourage plenty of young growth. In winter Berger does some heavy pruning for structure. In spring, he thins both new and year-old growths for proper spacing and stronger branch structure. He'll continue thinning branches as he thins the developing fruit, which must be done to achieve high quality peaches and to avoid breakage. Berger reckons he's removed 80-90 percent of this year's abundant fruit set. It's not just about spacing: "You have to look at every branch" he said, "and ask yourself how many peaches it can support."

A couple of weeks before harvest, the branches of each tree are roped together for support. The only tree roped in the orchard when I visited was a single Early Redhaven, which was carrying a big, beautiful crop of glowing red peaches. "This is a good one for home gardeners," Berger said. "It's easy to grow and tasty." He tests the peaches every day for ripeness; this variety is deceptive, turning red well before they are fully ripe, which is the way he wants them. There's a product that's supposed to boost the sugar content, but if you are growing peaches for yourself, Berger suggests you just leave them to ripen on the tree — that's the best way to get lots of sugar.

Masimoto did save his peaches, by the way. The growing popularity of direct sales and the demand for organic fruit — and no doubt some nostalgia for good old fashioned peach flavor — caught up with him just in time. **EW**

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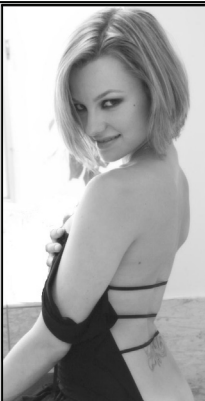
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