

AVOCADOS – planting location, soil drainage, soil salts, cold tolerance.

There are three primary races of avocado: Mexican, Guatemalan and West Indian. However hundreds of years of cross-breeding of two or more of these races has produced MANY hybrids. The Mexican and the Guatemalan avocados, along with the hybrids of these two races, are the best-adapted to South Texas, whereas the West Indian, is just a little too cold-tender even for our warm winters. Although there are many similarities between the races; the Mexican varieties are generally more cold-hardy and bear fruit with smooth, thin, shiny-green or black rinds. Guatemalan avocados are less cold-hardy and bear fruits with blackish-green, thick, bumpy rinds. Avocado trees are generally tall growing, with large shiny green leaves, and look a lot like a magnolia in size and shape. While avocados are not as completely care free in South Texas as some fruit trees, a little extra attention can reward you with an abundant harvest of rich, buttery fruits.

Before buying an avocado tree and planting it, it is important to consider a few factors including location, best variety for your needs, as well as soil, water and fertilizer requirements.

Location. Avocado trees can become enormous, growing up to 60 feet and 35 feet wide. These tall, stately trees are cloaked in large, leathery dark green leaves, often accented by coppery-red new foliage. The blossoms are an added bonus, their creamy-white clusters stand out vividly against the dark green leaves; and the Mexican varieties have a wonderful spicy fragrance. The heavy foliage and large size of the avocado trees means that they can produce abundant shade. But the size also means the mature tree can often become too large for a small yard, and definitely they are not a patio tree. So either plant them if you have the room, otherwise you will do a lot of pruning.

Here in the Valley there are limiting factors which often keep avocado trees from reaching their mature size, even if you give them plenty of space. These factors are: soil, salts, and temperature.

Soil drainage. Poor drainage of the soil is probably the leading cause of avocado tree death in the Valley. Make sure you find a spot with deep, well drained soil. Avocados simply will NOT tolerate poor drainage. Be sure to select an area that does not allow water to stand for a long period of time. Also be sure that the top layer of soil (that dark, rich, organic layer) is deep. One tip for planting avocados in the average soil is to build a 6 inch to an 8 inch hill of soil rich in potting mix, mixed 50:50 with your soil. Plant your tree so that the top of the root ball is within and covered by this mound. This will insure good root aeration in an otherwise poorly drained site.

Salts. It is a good idea to run a simple pH test before planting your avocado tree. If you are unsure how to conduct a pH reading on your soil, contact the

Cameron County Extension agent located in San Benito, TX. While a soil pH of 5.5 to 6.5 is ideal, no soil in the Valley naturally has this low or acid pH. Although some varieties will tolerate a little higher or more alkaline pH soil, no avocado will tolerate extremes of alkalinity. To guard against a high pH soil, which is normal here, applications of soil acidifier, or soil sulfur will bring down the pH.

Temperature. When planning for a site to plant your avocado tree, select one that will afford your tree some cold protection. A building, a high fence, or a swimming pool on the north side of the tree will make for a critical 2 to 3 degree difference in the winter air temperature. And those 2 to 3 degrees can make the difference between a frozen and dead avocado tree or an alive and producing tree.

Cold tolerance, salt tolerance, disease-resistance, fruit size and quality, and season of production are all factors to consider before choosing which variety of avocado you want. Your Texas Certified Nursery Professional will be happy to give you a complete rundown of all these factors, and can help you select the best variety of delicious, abundant avocados for your need and yard situation. In next weeks article on avocados; tree selection, variety selection, planting, watering fertilizing and insect treatment will be presented.

(Information source: Cecile Waugh of Waugh's Nursery, McAllen, TX)
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