

# AVOCADO Culture

## INTRODUCTION

Cold tolerant Avocados have recently become available to Houston homeowners. Avocados are an attractive tree with all of the qualities we look for in ornamentals. They are classified as medium-large trees for landscape purposes. Their shape is reminiscent of a Sweet Bay Magnolia – tall and graceful with a somewhat pyramidal shape. Their foliage has a rich green color. Depending on the variety, the fruit is green or a blackish purple in color.

## PLANTING

Choose a site that has the maximum amount of cold protection. The south or southeast side of a building is optimum, but any area with protection from cold north winds will do. Avocados do not like soggy soil and must be planted in a well-drained area or raised bed.

Avocados are planted slightly deeper than recommended for most fruit trees. It is a good idea to plant your Avocado tree so that *the graft union is below ground level*. This will give your tree added protection in the rare case where the top is killed in a severe winter or broken in a storm. An Avocado will re-sprout from above the graft and re-grow quickly from the established root system.

Do not cover the graft immediately after planting, but follow these steps to cover it gradually: Dig a hole that is twice the diameter of the pot and 2” deeper than the depth of the rootball. Remove the tree from the container, place in the center of the hole and fill the hole half full with loose soil.

Fill the partially filled hole with water. Once the water has drained completely, backfill to the top of the rootball leaving a 2” deep depression. Water again and allow it to drain completely. Root stimulator may be used in the water at the time of planting. Fill in with additional soil gradually over the season until the graft is approximately 2” – 4” below grade.

Make a small levee around the tree approximately 2” high at planting time. Water as needed so as to not let the root ball dry out, but be careful not to over water. Drip irrigation is highly beneficial to Avocado culture. Mulch with two inches of loose organic material such as pine bark or pine straw. Do not allow mulch materials to touch the trunk of the tree.

## SUN PROTECTION

Your tree will need to be given some protection from the sun for the first year. You can use stakes and burlap or shade cloth to build a lean-to a foot or so higher than your tree. Sun protection is only required during periods of intense light and long days with severe southern or western exposure. Protection is not usually necessary after the first year but watch the foliage for signs of sunburn for the first two years.

## FEEDING

Wait several months before you fertilize your tree. It does not need to be fed until it has an established root system. Use half-strength feedings of a balanced fertilizer once or twice

during the summer of the first year in the ground. Beginning the second year, Avocados can be fed the same fertilizers and on the same schedule as citrus, making it easy for Houston fruit growers.

**February:** Apply 9-cups of cottonseed meal spread evenly around the drip line before annual application of compost and mulch.

**Every 4 – 6 weeks from February through August:** Apply Nelson's Citrus-Avocado Food (12-10-10 plus minors) or balanced organic fertilizer (Microlife, Gardenville Soil Food, Ladybug). Follow instructions on package. Skip February if cottonseed meal was applied.

Do not feed nitrogen rich fertilizers after August since tender fall growth may be damaged by early frost. An application of kelp meal in September boosts cold tolerance.

### PRUNING

Pruning is not necessary for production as it is in some fruit varieties. You can shape your tree by pruning, such as removing unwanted branches. Prune after fruiting. Trim out dead or damaged wood as needed.

### COLD PROTECTION

Even cold tolerant Avocados can be damaged by a severe freeze - especially when they are young. Such freezes are rare in Houston, but merit a protection plan. Water thoroughly prior to any expected freeze. Young trees should be covered with a blanket or cloth tarp during a freeze. Do not use plastic as freeze protection. Additional heat can be provided with a light bulb, but be sure it does not make direct contact with the tree. You can mound soil to a depth of a foot or two around the trunk to help your tree survive even if the top is killed. Your tree will become more tolerant to cold as it ages and should withstand temperatures to 18°F when mature.

### PRODUCTION

You can expect fruit production in about 2 years after your tree is well established. Mature trees can produce 2 – 3 bushels of fruit if they are well-managed. Fruit ripens over a long period. Mexican race avocados ripen in late summer, and others will ripen from September to November.

Your fruit will not soften on the tree so you will need to pick them and hold on to them until they soften. Immature fruit will not soften, so do not pick too early. Test maturity by picking a few and ripening them on the kitchen counter. Mature fruit will soften within 3 to 8 days. If the first fruits do not soften, the fruit on the tree is not ready to harvest. Test every week until they soften. The balance of the fruit on the tree should now be ready to harvest. Fruit can be stored on trees if the temperatures are cool. Best harvesting time is when temps are in the 70's. Ripe fruit may drop from the trees. Ripe Avocados are not soft when they fall, but will soften in 3 – 8 days.