

# MULBERRIES



A member of the Moraceae family (which includes fig, breadfruit, and sassafras), the mulberry produces fruit that looks like a tightly beaded blackberry. Some mulberry varieties reach 30 to 50 feet, while others are available as bush and dwarf varieties.

## ENJOYING THE FRUIT

Mulberries, which have a mild and very sweet flavor, vary in color from white to lavender to red to purplish-black. You can use them as you would the more-familiar berries like blueberry or raspberry. Enjoy them fresh or bake them into pies, muffins, or jam.

Mulberry leaves are also edible. They're high in vitamins A and C, fiber, calcium, and magnesium. The Mongabay website offers a free downloadable book on the health benefits of trees with edible leaves, including the white mulberry: [https:// news.mongabay.com/2023/02/trees-with-edible-leaves-can-boost-human-nutrition-new-book-free-download/](https://news.mongabay.com/2023/02/trees-with-edible-leaves-can-boost-human-nutrition-new-book-free-download/).



## CHOOSING A SITE

Aim for a spot with full sun, although mulberries will tolerate light shade. They like deep, well-drained soil that has been enriched with compost. The dark fruit stains badly, so *don't* plant near walkways or your house!

## PLANTING

Mulberries aren't fussy but should be planted in a hole that is twice the size of the root ball to give them plenty of room to establish a robust root system. Most trees do better when purchased as bare-root plants rather than in a pot. Potted trees often become pot bound, which stresses the plant and can set back its growth several years.

Use mostly the existing soil to fill in the planting hole (see our [tree planting instructions](#)). You can mix in a small amount (10%) of compost, but newly planted trees don't need a lot nutrients when they should be focusing on establishing roots.

## TAKING CARE: WATERING, FEEDING, PRUNING

For the first 2 years during the growing season, water the new tree once a week if it hasn't rained. After that, it should need watering only during periods of drought.

This fast-growing plant needs little fertilizer and shouldn't need any pruning. Mulch at least 2 inches around the trunk to reduce grass competition.

You can train a tree into bush form by *coppicing*: cutting the main trunk to encourage many suckers to then grow. You can also espalier a tree with a single trunk by developing one main framework and shortening the branches to about 6 inches. But for the most low-maintenance approach, buy a variety that best fits the space so you don't have to be on top of the pruning. Just sit back and enjoy those berries!

## AVOIDING PESTS AND DISEASE

Mulberries are so prolific that you don't have to worry much about pests, other than birds. Usually, the plants produce enough berries for everyone to enjoy.

## HARVESTING

The berries ripen in midsummer over a three-week period. Depending on the variety, a bush can produce up to 10 bushels of fruit.

## CONSIDERING SPECIFIC VARIETIES

Mulberry has three main types: white, black, and red. *White mulberry* (*Morus alba*) was brought to North America from China for the silk trade; these mulberry leaves are the main diet of the silkworm. This type is the hardiest, surviving to  $-25^{\circ}\text{F}$ . *Black mulberry* (*Morus nigra*), also native to China, is cultivated throughout Europe for its large, sweet-tart fruit. *Red mulberry* (*Morus rubra*) is native to North America and ranges from the mid-Atlantic to Florida. Mulberries will thrive in zones 5–8.

Here are a few varieties you might want to try:

### ILLINOIS EVERBEARING

This hybrid of the white and red mulberry is known for its large, sweet-tart flavored fruit and exceptional hardiness. It produces 2-inch blackberry-like fruit, which ripens over 6 weeks, providing a long harvest. It can reach 30 feet tall, so give this one plenty of room.

### DWARF GERARDI

This naturally dwarf form is slow-growing and ideal for small gardens. The space between buds (called an *internode*) is only an inch or less, whereas on full-size mulberry bushes, it can be 5-6 inches. Fruit is full-sized, sweet, and juicy, with the vinous quality that characterizes the best mulberries. The bush grows to 8 feet tall and 6 feet wide after several decades.

### BLACK BEAUTY

This variety is naturally dwarfing and will reach only 12 feet, with branches low to the ground. It's easy to grow as a large shrub that can be maintained at 6–8 feet with pruning. The black berries are large, juicy, and abundant.

