

# Growing Fruit Trees

## for the BODY AND SOUL

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Dr Sim is a senior paediatric surgeon and paediatric urologist in private practice. He is a gardening hobbyist, not an expert, and has planted various fruit trees with some success. Sharing and learning common experiences and exchanging plants with fellow doctors on various chat groups have been a rewarding journey.



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*I thought I could cut down any tree in my own garden.*

I had a big, mature durian tree bearing such good fruits that I did not have to buy any durians for over 15 years. When I decided to renovate my house, the Public Utilities Board (PUB) discovered during the preconstruction survey that the roof of a major underground sewer that passed between the tree and my house had collapsed. We had a situation! The support roots of the tree were directly above the sewer pipe; however, the contractor assured me that they would excavate below the roots to repair the sewer. But I came home that day and to my horror, the workers had dug a two-metre trench cutting all the support roots. The tree became unstable and could fall onto the house during a storm.

Work was immediately halted and the architect applied to the National Parks Board (NParks) for the tree to be removed. Being within the tree conservation area, permission was denied. Over the ensuing few months, many meetings were held with the PUB and NParks manager and arborist. Permission to remove the tree was eventually granted because of the danger of it falling onto the house. Anyone who grows big fruit trees in your garden must be aware of this. While the fruits are yours, the tree is part of the heritage of our nation and you may not cut it down at will once it reaches a certain size. My builder was fined a few thousand dollars for removing a much smaller rambutan tree.

### Botany basics

In botany, a fruit is the seed-bearing structure in flowering plants (also known as angiosperms) formed from the ovary

after flowering. Therefore durians, tomatoes, chillis, long beans and brinjals are all “fruits”.

Since the incident, I no longer grow fruit trees in the ground. My soursop (*Annona muricata*) is planted in a big pot. To prevent the roots from coming out of the bottom of the pot and growing into a big tree, the pot is placed on a tile. I also grow shrubs such as brinjal/eggplant (*Solanum melongena*), ladies' fingers/okra (*Abelmoschus esculentus*) and many others in pots.

Topsoil is a living system that allows plants to grow well. Most of built-up Singapore has no topsoil for cultivation because our ground had been dug up. A building site leaves us with sticky yellow clay. It is expensive to cover our garden with good topsoil and if we do not maintain it, the soil will be bleached and wash away by our heavy rainfall. Planting in pots is the only option when living in high-rise buildings.

### Fruit trees to consider

#### Tomatoes

Tomatoes are easy to grow. Use a large pot or trough to encourage root growth. Determinate tomato plants have a main stem and all the fruits are produced within a short season. Following that, the plant diminishes in vigour. The indeterminate variety keeps branching and bears fruit continuously. You would need stakes to support the vine. I had a vine that gave me over 400 fruits when I fed it intensively.

#### Papayas

Papaya is best grown in the ground or a very large pot. When the tree gets too



tall, cut the trunk and allow the stump to grow new shoots to become a new plant.

### Bananas

I grow bananas in the ground as the undergrown stem will produce new suckers and after some time, you will get a cluster of trees. Growing bananas will let you enjoy the sensory experience of tree-ripened fruits. Commercial ones are harvested green and artificially ripened with ethylene gas.

### Sarawak pepper

Sarawak pepper is a vine that gives you the most aromatic spice for many years. Its support must be durable. Harvest the berries when they begin to turn yellow. You can get black pepper by drying the whole berries. White pepper is made by soaking the fruits in water until the flesh of the berries has rotted, then collecting and drying the seeds. Birds love the sweet ripened berries. Harvest them early in the morning before the birds do.

### Dragon fruits

Dragon fruits are cacti and easy to grow. They need well-drained soil and lots of sun. I grow the yellow-skinned variety from seeds but am disappointed as the fruits are tiny compared to those from South America. Their midnight blooms, the size of a dinner plate, are beautiful but last only a few hours.

### Pineapples

Pineapples are a bromeliad from South America. They are tough and easy to grow. The green tuft from the top of a fruit will grow into a new plant. The tiny seeds in the "eye" of the fruit can also be germinated but they take too long to grow. When grown in pots they bear

fruits earlier. Even without much care it will produce small fruits. Currently I have four pineapple fruits at different stages of maturation out of a total of 17 pots.

### Tips on caring for your fruit trees

#### Pot and soil

We have to prepare a good growing medium for healthy plant growth. I mix top soil, potting mix and compost for optimal growth, and adjust drainage by adding sand. Use organic preparations when planting edibles. We have to feed them throughout the growing period before fruiting. A healthy plant gives you good fruits. Fruiting puts a high demand on potted plants. Plants are fertilised at two-week intervals but when fruiting, I feed them with diluted nutrients every day. Nutrients applied to a pot do not seep into the ground beyond the root system of the plant.

Weed control is easy in a pot. Potted plants can dry out easily and some trees need watering twice a day. How much water to use for a pot? I water until it begins to come out of the bottom of the pot. Too much water washes out the nutrients. Depending on the soil type, it takes about 20% to 25% volume of water to saturate the soil.

#### Urine

Urine is free and completely organic. Fresh urine is sterile and almost odourless when used immediately. Dilute in a 1:20 ratio or more. Give it to your fruit trees especially during fruiting season.

#### Pest control

You can kill almost all sap-sucking insects with detergent solution. Mealybugs are the most troublesome.

They can be killed if the solution is strong enough. By trial and error, you will find the right strength of solution. Test it on a small part of the plant to make sure it is not too strong for it.

Chewing insects such as caterpillars and grasshoppers are best picked off the plant. I find perfumed hand soap gives some success. Snails are controlled by snail pellets – treat the entire garden but avoid the edible plants. Egg shells are supposed to be effective. Squirrels, however, can be destructive.

#### Composting

Many of us have our own compost heap for our garden wastes. My worm bin composts all my kitchen wastes. The worm juice and worm castings are excellent for plants.

#### Physical benefits

It may be cheaper to buy your fruits from the supermarket but you cannot put a price on the joy and therapeutic benefits derived from gardening. Heart rates and blood pressures fall, cortisol levels drop and my mind is filled with harp music and rippling water sounds when I tend to my garden. One can form strong bonds with trees – I found out just how strong when I missed my durian tree!

*PS. Much of what I learnt was from joining the Doctors Gardening Group on social media. ♦*

#### Legend

1. Home grown tomatoes
2. Beautiful flower of a dragon fruit plant. The flower starts to bloom in the evening, reaches its zenith near midnight and lasts only for a few hours
3. Pineapple flowers