

A fruitful endeavor

Mulberries may be elusive, but their flavor is extraordinary, say these backyard growers. Plant them now and reap the rewards come summer.

By Julie Chai

KEVIN AND MONICA LYNCH didn't set out to become urban farmers. The husband and wife, both schoolteachers, started as novice gardeners, just trying their hand at various edibles in their Palo Alto, California, backyard. Then they tasted a berry off their first spindly mulberry tree. "It was love at first bite," says Monica.

The flavor was unlike any fruit they'd tasted—sweeter and more complex than a blackberry, with a slightly grassy-tasting stem running through the core of the fruit. And unlike some other berries, which can be hit or miss, says Kevin, "*every* mulberry is really good."

Unable to find mulberries in markets, the couple planted more trees. Ten years later, their backyard is a mini orchard, and the Lynches have reorganized their lives around the summer harvest season. "We used to go to San Diego and spend five days at the beach each summer, but now we pick mulberries," Kevin says. With their iPods on and containers dangling from lanyards around their necks, the couple work from dawn to dusk, staining their fingers with purple juice.

While they've found plenty of uses for their berries at home (they may have invented the mulberry martini), the Lynches also sell fruit to local restaurants and at the farmers' market in downtown Palo Alto. Sons Osy (short for Osmanthus, the couple's favorite shrub), 12, and Halo, 10, often man the cart. "It's a break-even business for us," Kevin says. The payoff is personal: "It started with the berries, but the friendships keep us growing."

INFO themulberryguy.com

If you plant bare-root trees in winter, you'll be able to harvest in early summer; the Lynches pick mulberries from May through August.



IDEA

Store your berries in containers with holes for air circulation.



MIDDLE LEFT: HOWARD RICE/GETTY IMAGES



OBSSESSIONS

GROW YOUR OWN

Because mulberries have a short shelf life, the best way to get them outside of a farmers' market is to plant them yourself. (Sunset climate zones vary by species; see sunset.com/plantfinder.)

CHOOSE THE TASTIEST

The Lynches have crowned these the most flavorful varieties: 'Illinois Everbearing' (*Morus alba* x *rubra*), a heavy producer of citrus-flavored berries; 'Pakistan' (*M. macroura*), which grows best in areas with long, warm growing seasons and bears finger-length berries with a hint of vanilla; and 'Black Beauty' (*M. nigra*), which bears juicier fruit.

TREAT THEM RIGHT

In wintertime, plant bare-root trees in full sun. The Lynches water their mulberries regularly during the first year, then let rainwater take over. They don't fertilize, but they do mulch to keep weeds down and retain water.

PLANT 'EM AND LEAVE 'EM

Mulberries grow 15 to 30 feet tall and 35 feet wide. "Once they're happy, they stay happy," says Kevin, "and they don't like to be moved." Their roots are aggressive, so avoid planting them over sewer lines. Remove fallen fruit from driveways and paths, since it can stain paving and stick to shoes.

PRUNE WHEN THEY'RE SLEEPING

To control size or shape, prune trees while they're dormant and leafless in winter. Cut off dead or crossing branches; avoid making any cuts close to the trunk.

TICKLE THEM. REALLY.

The Lynches test for ripeness by tickling the berries, barely touching the bottoms as they move the fruit back toward the branch. If the berry releases, it's ripe. "If you need to make an effort to pull it off, it's not ready," says Kevin. 🍷

Purchase mulberry trees from Peaceful Valley (groworganic.com) and Raintree Nursery (raintreenursery.com).