

Tiny trees, tasty apples

The columnar apple tree may be a dwarf, but it can produce up to six pounds of fruit a year

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Question: At a recent home show I saw an intriguing plant that was called a columnar apple tree. Can you tell me more about this tree? Will it grow in our area and if so, how to care for it?

Answer: The columnar apple tree is a special type of dwarf tree that was developed specifically to grow in small spaces. They basically grow straight up instead of out, so the apples are clustered on very short branches up the trunk, making them look like a pole of apples. They grow to about 8 feet tall and 2 feet wide so they are excellent space savers, working well in small areas such as decks, patios, and entry ways. It is definitely an intriguing tree, and a fun addition to just about any garden.

The columnar apple tree will grow in our area, and because of its size and unique characteristics they are ideal for growing in pots, but can also be

planted in the ground. When considering a location, like all apple trees, they should be placed in full sun. When choosing a pot, look for one that is 16-20 inches deep and wide (whiskey or wine barrels are a good option), if planting in the ground, space them about two feet apart. Most are sold bare root; to plant them, remove the wrap and spread the roots over a low mound of soil, making sure the graft union (the swollen bump at the base of the tree trunk) is above the soil surface.

These trees are typically “self-unfruitful”, meaning they require another apple tree for cross pollination in order to produce fruit, so it is best to plant at least two trees of different varieties. The act of pollination depends mostly on bees and to a lesser extent on other insects. They will generally produce fruit the first year, but it is best for the tree to remove the fruit during the first year or two to allow the tree to establish good trunk and branch structure. Once



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A columnar apple tree can be a great space-saver for small growing areas.

mature, a columnar tree can produce up to 1/8 bushel of apples (one bushel equals 42-48 pounds or about 126 medium apples) per year. A few popular varieties include “Crimson Spire”, red fruit with tart-sweet white flesh; “Golden Sentinel”, sweet, juicy yellow fruit; “Northpole”, crisp, juicy McIntosh-type; “Scarlet Sentinel”, large, sweet green-yellow fruit with red blush; and, “Scarlet Spire”, a juicy red-and-green eating apple.

Another characteristic of these trees is they require minimal care. Only light pruning, mainly to remove damaged or dead branches in the spring (after the risk of frost has passed), or to lightly shape the tree. You may also need to thin the fruit to singles where there are big clusters of apples, removing the smaller fruit; this will help produce large fruit and prevent the branches from breaking due to the weight of too many apples. They are easy

to fertilize. Just apply a soluble liquid fertilizer during the early growing season (March-June), or use a time released granular fertilizer once per year in the spring. It can also be helpful to top-dress with 1-2 inches of compost each spring to help restore the soil, both for those in pots and in the ground. Because these are small trees, they have smaller root systems, and thus need regular water throughout the year. The soil should not be too dry or too soggy.

To produce nice quality apples, follow the OSU guidelines found in the publication “Growing Tree Fruits and Nuts in the Home Orchard,” publication EC 819.

These easy to grow dwarf trees add an element of whimsy to your garden. Be creative – consider using them as a pair to frame an entry way or in a row as a privacy screen. You can also add small bedding plants under the tree, or groundcovers, bulbs and small herbs such as thyme and chives to bring in another pop of color. And of course they will also bring you the joy of fresh apples from your own trees.

Do you have a gardening question? Please e-mail, call, or visit the Douglas County Master Gardeners Plant Clinic at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu, 541-236-3052, or 1134 S.E. Douglas Ave., Roseburg.