

Kiwifruit

By Bobbi Gustafson

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A very nutritious, easy-to-grow food

Kiwifruit, also called Chinese gooseberries, or simply kiwis, are a very nutritious fruit with the vitamin C content twice that of an orange. They are an excellent and reliable fruit source between November and February. In addition, they make wonderful food gifts and are a novel topic for conversation. (If you dry the vines, you can even use them in craft projects.)

There are many varieties of kiwis to choose from. The most common kiwi species is *Actinidia deliciosa* 'Hayward,' which produces a fuzzy brown fruit. Another variety is one with a smooth edible skin that looks like grapes, *Actinidia arguta*, known as "hardy kiwi," or "baby kiwi." Yet another is *Actinidia chinensis*, a large-fruited species with yellow-fleshed cultivars; however, it does not produce consistently in our climate. A cold-hardy variety, *Actinidia kolomikta*, can tolerate temperatures of minus 40 degrees F.

Kiwis are dioecious, meaning they have separate male and female plants. One male can pollinate six to ten females. For pollination and crop production, males must be present. Be careful about buying plants that are simply marked "male" or "female." Our family bought a kiwi not realizing that we needed both male and female plants for crop production. We bought what we thought were a male and two female plants and waited to have fruit. Unfortunately, the plants were mismarked; what we actually had were three males. It is a good idea to buy kiwis when they are in flower to ensure you are buying what you want.

They are beautiful plants and grow rapidly once established, especially the males. You can keep male plants trimmed smaller, because you don't need a lot of flowers for pollination. The male plant does not produce fruit but does produce abundant vines and foliage.

These plants are perennial vines that can grow to 40 feet in length. If you don't continually prune and train them, they'll grow up trees, over fences and onto the roofs of any adjacent structures. Your house can quickly turn into Sleeping Beauty's castle. Trim the runners three or four times a year starting after flowering and pollination, but be careful not to disturb the flowers or fruit.

Kiwis like protection. The warmth from being near the house is an advantage. If you plant in an open area, you may have to plant a wind break. You can set up a T-bar trellis, train them espalier style, or train them into a canopy. Whatever you choose, the plants will develop quickly once they are established.

If you choose to grow organically, remember that kiwis like a pH of 5.5 to 6.0, which can be achieved by adding lime to the soil in the fall. In February or March, sprinkle a pint each of rock phosphate and greensand (OMRI-approved organics) eighteen inches from the base of established female plants to feed flowers, fruits and roots. You can also then spread an inch of compost around both female and male plants and apply more compost in June or July. It is

important to water thoroughly once or twice a week during a dry spell and throughout the summer.



Kiwi plants are perennial vines that can grow to 40 feet in length and, if not continually pruned and trained, can grow up trees, over fences and onto the roofs of any adjacent structures. *Photo by Lynn Heagney / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners.*

Harvesting kiwis after the first hard freeze gives you a sweeter more flavorful crop. Once you have harvested the kiwis, place them directly into the refrigerator. Remove them ten or twenty at a time and place in a brown paper bag with an apple at temperatures above 41 degrees F. The apple produces ethylene gas that helps ripen the kiwis in four to six days.

PNW507 is a publication put out by Oregon State University Extension that is very helpful for someone who wishes to grow kiwis in the Northwest. It is not an organic publication but tells about planning and planting, trellising, training, planting windbreaks, trimming and watering. It also discusses different varieties, conventional feeding, preparing the soil, plant sensitivities, harvesting, diseases and any pests you might find. The pictures of how to trim each year are particularly helpful.

The most common kiwi species is *Actinidia deliciosa* Hayward, which produces this fuzzy brown fruit. Photo by Bobbi Gustafson / WSU Skagit County Master Gardener.

Kiwis are absolutely delicious. A beautiful vine, full of vitamins, easy to grow, with a long, controllable ripening season. Growing kiwis is easy and gives you a feeling of self-sufficiency. There is a lot of satisfaction in that.



The most common kiwi species is *Actinidia deliciosa* Hayward, which produces this fuzzy brown fruit. *Photo by Bobbi Gustafson / WSU Skagit County Extension.*

Research scientist, Lisa Wasko DeVetter, Assistant Professor of Berry Crops at WSU, will be speaking about small fruits on Tuesday, April 10. Her presentation is from 1:00 p.m.-2:30 p.m., in the Sakuma Auditorium at the WSU Mount Vernon Northwestern Washington Research and Extension Center, 16650 State Route 536 (Memorial Highway). Please join us.

RESOURCES:

- “Soft Rock Phosphate=Organic Phosphorous.”
http://extension.oregonstate.edu/mg/metro/sites/default/files/Organic_gardening.pdf
OMRI (Organic Material Review Institute). Oregon State University.
- “Greensand=Organic Potassium.”
<http://www.ext.colostate.edu/mg/gardennotes/234.html> Colorado State University.
- “Growing Kiwifruit.” A Pacific Northwest Publication. PNW 507. Reprinted April 2005.