

What You Should Look for in the Garden Center: Fruiting or Non-Fruiting Plants

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To fruit, or not to fruit: that is the question. With apologies to Mr. Shakespeare, we should consider this question carefully before purchasing plants at the garden center, or digging them up from the woods.

Sometimes, having trees and shrubs produce some sort of fruit is a good thing. If we are trying to attract birds, squirrels, and other wildlife to our yards, then having something for them to eat is a great incentive. And some landscape plants have fruits and nuts that are also edible and tasty for people, such as serviceberry and filbert.

Other plants have ornamental fruit. The bright red fruit of hollies (both evergreen and deciduous) are extremely attractive, especially during bleak winter weather. Beautyberry, buttonbush, and many of the viburnums also have showy fruit.

But sometimes fruiting plants are not desirable. The fruit, which can also include pods, capsules, and other structures, can be messy, increase your yard work, or even be dangerous. To be fair, the downsides of fruiting are often affected by where you plant these trees. Gum balls and locust pods are not a problem when they are planted away from the house, with a wood chip mulch underneath them. However, when you plant them over your driveway, sidewalk, or (and I wouldn't say this if I hadn't seen it) swimming pool, you can expect nearly daily cleanup chores.

Sweet gum (*Liquidambar styraciflua*) is the number one messy tree I receive complaints about. The gum balls are spikey capsules that contain numerous winged seeds. They drop from November through April. They are slow to decay, and resist mowing. They are unpleasant to step on when barefoot, and can cause people to slip and fall when they roll out from underneath you.

Honey locust (*Gleditsia triacanthos*) drop brownish pods that are about 7 to 18 inches long. As with sweet gum fruit, these pods are slow to break down and don't chop up easily with a lawn mower. Fortunately, they are not as dangerous as gum balls, but they are still a chore to clean up. Although not as bad as the related tropical Poinciana (flamboyant tree), which drops pods that are up to 3 feet long.

Maples (*Acer spp.*) have pairs of samaras ("helicopters") that flutter down into landscape beds and gutters. Silver and Norway maples are the worst, and should be avoided.

Crabapples (*Malus spp.*) can be a messy choice as well, depending on where you plant them. The fruit can drop onto sidewalks and parking areas, and can cause passersby to twist an ankle when they step on them. As they rot, they can stain the sidewalk, as well as cause a stinky mess.

Mulberry (*Morus spp.*) fruit can stain cars and sidewalks when they drop. Even worse, they are greatly desired by a number of birds. The partially digested fruit creates incredible messes on anything...or anyone...underneath the roosting birds.

But by far, the worst fruiting plant you can purchase is a female ginkgo tree. Ginkgo (*Ginkgo biloba*) has separate male and female trees. Not only do they have the general messy sliminess of other trees with overripe fruit, but ginkgo "fruit" (actually a naked seed) smell incredibly foul. If you buy one of these trees, only buy from a reputable garden center that only sells the males, or you will regret it sincerely when the tree begins to bear fruit after about 10 years.

For more information on messy trees to avoid, contact the Purdue Extension Service at (812) 435-5287.