

# HOME

TUCSON

MAGAZINE

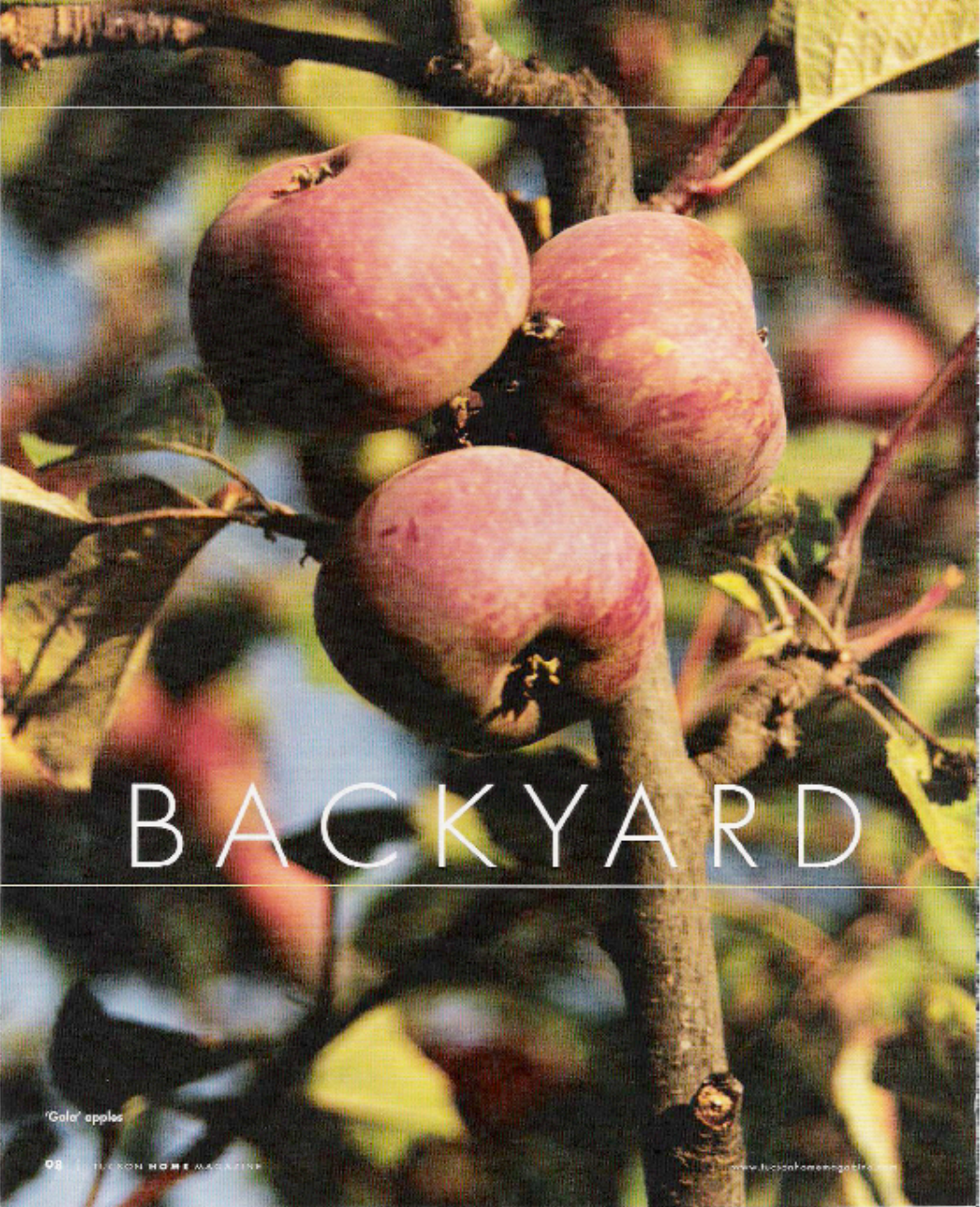
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SPECIAL SECTION: **WHAT'S IN, WHAT'S OUT** THE LATEST HOME & GARDEN TRENDS



# BACKYARD

'Gala' apples

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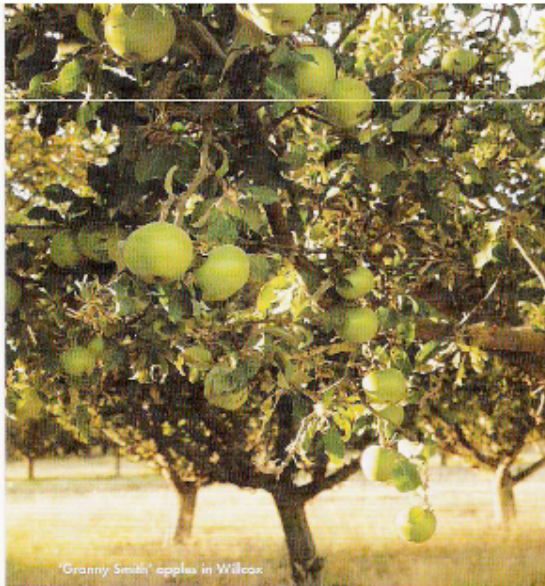
WRITTEN & PHOTOGRAPHED BY **SCOTT CALHOUN**  
(UNLESS OTHERWISE NOTED)

*With proper care, fig,  
pomegranate, and apple trees  
thrive in Tucson gardens*

## ORCHARDS

Picture a spinach salad, enlivened by a sprinkle of jewel-like pomegranate fruit, a pizza of smoked Gouda cheese and rich amber figs, or a fresh apple pie with a crumble-top crust. Would you dream of producing some of the fresh ingredients for these mouth-watering dishes in your own desert backyard? Would you believe you could do it with minimal fuss?

In fact, growing the fruit for the above-mentioned gourmet meals is easy, providing you choose the right trees. Among the myriad deciduous fruit trees on the market, three tough trees make the most sense in the desert: the pomegranate, the fig, and the apple. Along with citrus, this trio should form the backbone of a Tucson backyard orchard. ▶



'Granny Smith' apples in Wilcox.

## A P P L E S

Although not a fruit usually associated with the desert, some apple varieties are among the easiest fruit to grow here. Compared to nectarines or peaches, growing apples here is a cinch.

When planting apples, you'll need to consider chill hours, or the cumulative number of hours a given region spends between the temperatures of 32° and 45°. Pima County tends to average less than 500 hours most winters. When shopping for apples look for "low-chill" varieties. Some good bets follow:

'Donset Golden' is another popular low-desert apple with a firm texture reminiscent of a 'Golden Delicious' apple (which we can't grow here). The 'Donset Golden' bears fruit in May and June and only requires 100 chill hours. If you grow 'Donset Golden' and 'Anna' apples near each other, they will both produce more fruit.

If you prefer your apples on the tart side you may like the New Zealand import 'Gala.' Although the 'Gala' has listed chill hours of 500-800, desert testing suggests it will produce well with far fewer. The 'Gala's' reddish-orange and yellow skin gives it a distinctive look among desert apples. Perhaps the best accolade you can give the 'Gala' is that it makes a mean apple pie.

If you live in a cool part of Tucson or a higher elevation surrounding area, 'Granny Smith' apples make an excellent choice. Packed with sweet-tart flavor, 'Granny Smith' apples require 400-600 chill hours and produce bright green apples that retain their color long after harvest. 'Granny Smiths' are grown extensively in Cochise county, especially in Wilcox.

### GROWING APPLES

**typical size** 10-15 feet high and wide

**fruiting season** May and June

**planting season** Early spring and fall

**planting location** Full sun, but avoid areas with excessive reflected light such as south- or west-facing walls. Eastern exposures work well.

**water requirements** Water every 5-7 days during the warm season for the best fruit production.

**pruning** Prune lightly in winter to remove dead or crossing branches.

**Scott's tip** Thin apples to one or two per cluster to get bigger fruit.



### Deirdre's Crumble Top Gala Apple Pie

- 1/2 cup sugar
  - 2 tablespoons flour
  - 1/2 teaspoon nutmeg
  - 1/2 teaspoon cinnamon
  - 5 cups 'Gala' apples, peeled, seeded, and sliced
  - 1 frozen pie shell
  - 2 tablespoons lemon juice
- crumble topping (see following recipe)

Preheat oven to 350°. Mix dry ingredients, then mix in apples. Place in unrolled pie shell. Sprinkle lemon juice over top. Sprinkle crumbled topping over the apples. Bake on cookie sheet for about 1 hour or until crust is golden brown. Let sit for 20 minutes before slicing.

#### crumble topping

- 1/2 cup melted butter
- 1 cup flour
- 1 cup sugar

Melt butter. Mix with flour and sugar until it makes a crumbly mix. Set aside.



'Wonderful' pomegranate, *Punica granatum*

#### GROWING POMEGRANATES

**typical size** 6–12 feet high and wide. Can be trained as a single-trunked tree.

**fruiting season** Fall, usually around Halloween

**planting season** Spring or early fall

**planting location** Adaptable to a variety of planting locations including those with reflected heat

**water requirements** Although pomegranates will survive on very little water, weekly watering during the hot months encourages the best fruit production.

**pruning** Prune back in the winter when you can best see the branch structure. If you are training the tree to be a single-trunked specimen, remove suckers from the base.

**Scott's tip** As the fruit ripens, put bird netting over the tree to protect your crop from winged invaders.

## P O M E G R A N A T E S

For a tree made for the desert, the pomegranate. These trees will live on 14 inches of rainfall a year and produce fruit that contains more antioxidants than blueberries or red wine, and can be juiced to yield a deep red, sweet-tart liquid not unlike cranberry juice in taste. A tree with an ancient history, the pomegranate harbors a sensual past. A symbol of fertility, the shapely pomegranate is compared to a woman's breast in the Song of Solomon. The Chinese would traditionally roll pomegranates on the floor of the wedding chamber to bless newweds with fertility.

The 'Wonderful,' Tucson's benchmark pomegranate, lives in all soil types, produces hot orange-red flowers, and has bright green, glossy foliage. The 'Wonderful' pomegranate is so handsome, some gardeners plant the tree purely as an ornamental and leave the fruit to the birds. What a mistake! The bright red, softball-sized fruit of the 'Wonderful' offers thousands of sweet-tart rubylike seeds. Their rich, clear color makes a fine addition to salads (see following recipe). The fruit can also be juiced or eaten by the handful. Warning—the juice does stain!

Other pomegranate varieties of note for Tucson gardens include the patented 'Eversweet' pomegranate, which bears virtually pit-free fruit with non-staining juice. Like the 'Wonderful' pomegranate, the 'Eversweet' also produces large ornamental flowers. 'Utah Sweet' also grows well in Tucson and produces fruit with clear, non-staining juice.

The granddaddy of the pomegranates, the 'Ambrosia,' bears fruit up to three times the size of the 'Wonderful.' Although the skin of this fruit is pink, the seeds inside bear the same intense color and cranberry taste as the 'Wonderful.'



#### Wonderful Walnut Salad

- 1 cup chopped walnuts
- 1 bunch baby spinach leaves
- 1 'Wonderful' pomegranate with fruits separated
- 1 cup crumbled Gorgonzola cheese
- 1 bottle raspberry vinaigrette

Spread walnuts on a baking sheet and roast in a 400° oven for 6 minutes or until golden brown. Wash and cut stems off of spinach. After walnuts have cooled, arrange on a bed of spinach with pomegranates and Gorgonzola. Top with raspberry vinaigrette.



## FIGS



'Black Mission' fig (*Ficus carica*) with unripe fruit

When it comes to figs, 'Black Mission' stands out as the clear favorite in Southwest gardens. A large tree, the 'Black Mission' produces fruit with a purple-black skin and strawberry-colored flesh. Like all figs it can be espaliered in small gardens or for aesthetic effect. The 'Black Mission' fig bears heavy crops and lives a long time.

The second-most popular fig in Arizona is no doubt the 'Brown Turkey.' Renowned for its brown fruit with pink interior, the 'Brown



'Black Mission' fig

### GROWING FIGS

**typical size** 10–25 feet high and wide. Can be kept to 10 feet with careful pruning.

**fruiting season** Early summer and fall

**planting season** Spring or early fall

**planting location** Southwest or western exposure

**water requirements** After establishment, water figs every 3–7 days in the summer, possibly more during prolonged hot spells.

**pruning** Prune back crossing branches in the winter. Do not prune in late spring or summer—pruning in the summer may cause sunburn and injury to the tree.

**Scott's tip** Because figs have flexible branches, they are often espaliered (trained to grow in a flat plane). This is best done on eastern or southern exposures.