

How to Grow Your Own Avocados



What do you think of when you see an avocado? Most people think guacamole because avocados are the key ingredient. Now you can have your guacamole and, so to speak, grow it, too.

Key Facts About Growing Avocados

- ❖ Most avocados sold in the United States are grown in California or Florida.
- ❖ Fruit shape is similar to that of a pear. They are usually shiny, dark green in color with leathery skins.
- ❖ The interior of the fruit is pale green, becoming very soft when fully ripe.
- ❖ The seed, or pit, is about the size of a golf ball and is often pointed on the top end. It is not unusual to open a very ripe fruit and find that the seed has begun to germinate.
- ❖ Although it is not required for growth, the seedling produced will be more vigorous if it is chilled before it is planted.
- ❖ The chilling (called stratification) affects chemical balances in the seed and speeds up germination.
- ❖ To get the seed, select a fruit that is soft when squeezed and halve it gently to avoid injuring the seed.

Germinating the Seed

To start in water

Wash seed in warm water to remove all the pulp. Stick 3-4 toothpicks in the broad end of the avocado and suspend it over a container of water. Add enough water to cover half the pit. Change the water if it turns murky. When the stem and roots have formed, pot up the avocado as indicated below.

To start in soil

Place a layer of gravel or broken pottery in the bottom of a 5"-6" flower pot. A clay pot is preferable but plastic is suitable. Be sure to choose one with a hole for drainage. Fill the pot with a coarse grade of pre-packaged potting soil or make your own from a mixture of one part sphagnum peat moss, one part perlite and one part sterilized potting soil.

Wash seed in warm water to remove all the pulp. With a sharp razor blade, carefully remove the top quarter of the seed. (Note: This is not necessary, but speeds germination. It should **not** be done if the seed has already started to germinate.) Plant the seed so the tip is about 2"-3" above the surface and press the soil firmly around it. Water the pot thoroughly and place in a bright window. Water when the soil starts to dry.

Caring for the Plant

Avocados grow best at moderate temperatures (65-80° F) and prefer good light. An east or west window provides maximum light and results in a healthier plant.

- ❖ Water enough to soak the soil; the water should run out the drainage hole at the bottom of the pot.
- ❖ Remove excess drainage so the pot is not standing in water.
- ❖ Do not water the plant again until the soil becomes dry.

continued on next page ►

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- ❖ To test the soil, stick your finger in about 1” deep. If the soil is dry to that depth, it is time to water.
- ❖ The plant may be placed outdoors on a patio or balcony during the summer months. You may also sink the pot into the soil in a sunny spot in the garden.
- ❖ If the leaves begin to brown on the margins or turn a much lighter green, move to a location receiving less sunlight.
- ❖ Your plant may grow quite large outdoors and may need to be repotted before bringing it back indoors in late summer, generally around Labor Day for colder climates.
- ❖ Be sure to check carefully for signs of insects (especially under the leaves) before bringing the plant into the house.
- ❖ Your plant will be fast growing and tend to become tall with leaves along the entire stem. It can be allowed to grow naturally or can be pruned and shaped. If not pruned, branches start to develop near the top when the plant is 4'-5' tall.
- ❖ If you wish to shape your plant to make it bushier with branches lower on the stem, remove about 2” from the growing shoot when the plant is about 1' tall. It is preferable to do this in the spring as the daylight hours increase.
- ❖ Prune again when it is 2'-3' tall. New branches will develop below the cut point but are slower growing and usually stronger.
- ❖ Repot every 2-3 years, or as needed and fertilize regularly with houseplant fertilizer at the rate recommended on the package.

Problems

Yellowing and Dropping of Lower Leaves: This is usually caused by watering too frequently or insufficient light. Water less frequently and move to a sunnier location.

Browning of Leaf Edges: This may be caused by low humidity. A pebble tray may help. The brown edges may be trimmed to improve the appearance of the plant. This problem is quite common and often cannot be prevented.

Yellow Speckling of Leaves: This is often a symptom of spider mites, microscopic creatures that suck juices from the leaves. Examine the underside of affected leaves with a magnifying lens to check for this problem. There is also a light spider webbing on the leaves of heavily infested plants.

General Yellowing of New or Old Foliage: This is often a symptom of fertilizer deficiency. The veins of the leaves will often be green with the remainder of the leaf turning quite yellow and eventually dying. To correct, begin a regular fertilizer program.

Final Growing Thoughts

Avocado is a tropical tree and is not always a foolproof houseplant. Problems often occur because the plant is not growing in its natural environment, where the temperatures vary over the growing season, becoming cool for a period and providing the avocado with a time of “rest”. This doesn't happen when grown indoors and the plant may decline in vigor and health gradually over a year or two. It is advisable to start new seeds several times each year and discard the declining plants.

About Your Expert

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PlantAmerica Horticulturist Donna Moramarco (a.k.a. “Donna in the Garden”) has been helping gardeners solve problems and achieve their dreams for over two decades. Donna has degrees in horticulture and education plus over 20 years as a Cornell University extension horticulturist.