‘The desire to incorporate edible plant materials in the garden is hugely popular, even in light of additional maintenance needs. Folks are excited to see things grow and are proud of their harvest.’

**Kecia Carlson**
General Manager/Designer
Madeline George Landscape & Garden Design
Boise, Idaho

Pear trees (above and next page) are among the fruit trees that are seeing renewed interest due to the down economy and higher interest in grow-your-own food.
CONSUMERS HUNGER FOR FRUIT TREES, WHETHER THE FRUIT IS TIME-TESTED OR EXOTIC

By Elizabeth Petersen

For extraordinary beauty and fine fruit, Oregon’s iconic apple and pear orchards draw tourists to the foothills of Mt. Hood each year during spring bloom and fall harvest. Visitors take in the scenic Hood River Valley “Fruit Loop” to see dozens of local orchards and bring home boxes of fruit.

Now, 150 years after Henderson Lewelling took a wagon train full of fruit trees to the Hood River Valley, the Northwest boasts a flourishing fruit industry. But the matter of fruit trees in the Pacific Northwest is greater than the public draw. Tourism and the harvest are important, but there is more going on.

Commercial growers provide rootstock and bare root trees for orchardists, garden centers, hobbyists and the landscape industry. State extension researchers in Oregon and Washington tackle topics related to bigger, better and faster crops and seek solutions for farmers and homeowners alike. And designers, retailers and mail-order specialty vendors supply an array of fruit tree options for individuals. Educational opportunities abound to help customers grow fruit successfully.

Consumer demand

Do consumers really care about growing fruit? Anecdotal reports from landscape and garden designers run the gamut. At the 2009 Yard, Garden & Patio Show, some designers said, “It’s not happening,” but others had a different story.

At the Association of Professional Landscape Designers booth, for instance, professional designers Annie Bamberger of Dennis’ Seven Dees and Mary Baum of Creative Landscape Designs in Portland reported an increase in the “co-mingling” of fruiting plants with ornamentals.

Bamberger said she put in apricot, peach, plum and apple trees for a recent client. She has planted Cornelian cherry, three-way espaliers and columnar apple trees for others.

Several designers, retailers and growers are reporting increased interest in fruit trees in 2009. Apple tree espaliers are one way to combine the practicality of a fruit tree with the aesthetics of an ornamental tree.
It isn’t hard to get growers to talk about plants. The tough part is getting them to narrow down their list of favorites to just a handful. Here are some of the varieties our sources recommended:

**Picks from the pros**

Annie Bamberger
Landscape Designer
Dennis’ Seven Dees Landscaping, Inc.
Portland, Ore.

Evergreen huckleberries — *Vaccinium ovatum* — This easy shrub is native, drought tolerant, and has a great architecture, plus it works great as a filler in an arrangement, and its black-hued berries are delicious.

Columnar apple — *Malus sp.* — I especially like columnar apple trees. It is true that they need to get established and have a proper suitor for a pollinator before they will produce a good harvest. However, their size works very well in urban lots, particularly as lots get smaller. They have a stately presence when grouped together.

Sam Benowitz
Raintree Nursery
Morton, Wash.

Ashmead’s Kernel apple — *Malus domestica ‘Ashmead’s Kernel’* — The superb sweet-tart flavor of this apple has made it a connoisseur’s favorite. It’s great for eating fresh or making cider. The medium size fruit has brown russetting over a green background, and it keeps well. It is scab- and disease-resistant and easy to grow but only a moderate bearer.

Lapin’s sweet cherry — *Prunus ‘Lapins Sweet Cherry’* This reliable, self-fertile variety of sweet cherry bears, large black fruit that have very good flavor. The cherries are crack resistant.

Methley plum — *Prunus salicina* — Every year in July, before any other tree fruit is ripe, our Methley plum tree is loaded with thousands of sweet, medium size, reddish purple plums. They ripen over ten days and don’t keep but, oh are they good. The tree is an early, regular bearer and self fertile. It’s a Japanese plum hybrid.

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Fruiting trees also can provide rich color, as shown by this Methley plum tree (*Prunus salicina*). It grows well in most soil types, is hardy everywhere in the United States except for the northern plains, and is a heavy bearer to boot. It’s available in standard and dwarf cultivars.

Baum described a custom trellis she installed to retool and restore three “ugly” pear trees as espalier features, and said it is hard to source large evergreen huckleberry bushes for her customers. She encouraged growers to produce more to meet the increasing need.

Winning display gardens at the YGP Show featured fruit and nut trees. The coveted “Best of Show” award went to “Cultivate and Gather,” a bucolic garden scene by designer Barb Simon and landscaper Alfred Dinsdale. The garden was screened on three sides by neatly trained espaliered pear and apple trees grown by Blue Heron Farm Nursery of Independence, Ore.

“We had a huge response, probably the strongest in eight years,” Dinsdale said. “People love it.” The display wasn’t only about fruit. Also popular was a portable coop, a “chicken tractor that is common in England” in which live chickens were able to “scratch, peep, poop, work in the garden and eat weed seeds.” Crowned by

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a towering walnut tree, the display garden’s “beggar’s banquet” awed visitors.

Kecia Carlson, general manager and designer for Madeline George Landscape & Garden Design in Boise, Idaho, took in the YGP Show. She likes to create landscape designs with fruit trees and has found that customers are excited about them.

“The desire to incorporate edible plant materials in the garden is hugely popular, even in light of additional maintenance needs,” she said. “Folks are excited to see things grow and are proud of their harvest.”

Often, espaliered trees offer a design solution, and besides providing fruit, they are “beautiful, like art in the garden.” She sees interest in six-in-one apples, two-in-one pears, true dwarf and semi-dwarf apples, pears, cherries, plums, peaches and apricots. Of these, a “fair number (are) grown in containers.”

Carlson’s designs help the clients succeed and the plants thrive. “We
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source all fruit trees from the Northwest, primarily Oregon growers,” she said.

Around the world of fruit

Specialty growers, such as Raintree Nursery in Morton, Wash. and One Green World in Molalla, Ore., serve a niche market of customers intrigued by choice. Both offer an extraordinary assortment of fruit trees and plants from around the world, and both offer world-class opportunities for hobbyists and home growers, including those who use organic methods.

Raintree Nursery offers some 700 fruit cultivars from around the world and targets “backyard gardeners,” emphasizing disease resistance, flavor and nutritional value, and providing extensive educational support, including a full-time horticulturist to answer customer questions. Other special services include custom grafting, classes and resources, like the RHS Growing Fruit by Harry Baker, which owner Sam Benowitz considers “the best fruit growing book in the English language.”

To meet demand of small space or container gardeners, Raintree offers mini-dwarf, columnar, combo and espalier trees. Espaliers become fun works of art, according to Benowitz, who teaches workshops in training and grafting. Raintree’s three-in-one combo apple trees, two-in-one combo cherry trees and Liberty apple espaliers “have already been trained in a three-tier, T-shape, horizontal cordon.”

Raintree marks disease resistant choices in its catalog and supports research at Washington State University Extension Station at Mt. Vernon with donations from the sale of apple maggot control bags, among other things.

With so many choices, how do customers select? Benowitz offers this advice. Ask not, “What is the most flavorful fruit?” Instead, ask, “What do successful growers in my area grow, what will grow reliably here,” and then ask “Which are most flavorful?”

Jim Gilbert, who owns One Green World (retail and mail order) and
Northwoods Nursery (wholesale), also targets the niche market of customers who like the unusual. Since 1990, Gilbert has made annual (sometimes twice a year) trips to the former Soviet Union. That part of the world is a “treasure chest of plants and fruits we in the West knew nothing about,” he said.

Gilbert has found that Russian research into fruit and nut cultivars is well advanced. It is focused not on commercial production or shelf life, but on better fruit.

“Everybody grows a garden there, so research is about homeowner consumption,” he said. “Plants have to be hardy, easy to grow and produce nutritious food.”

Starting from high school Russian and a tour of the Kiev Botanic Garden, Gilbert now counts numerous exchanges and expeditions to his credit. Gilbert relishes bringing unusual fruiting plants to North American gardeners and has found sea berry to be the “most interesting” option for commercial use.

Already grown commercially in Russia, Germany and China, sea berry can grow in and improve poor soils. “It produces) wonderful juice with a citrusy flavor that is not unlike orange juice, with lots of Vitamin C, A and E,” Gilbert said. “I have attended four international sea berry conferences and observed its cultivation and use.”

The large, ornamental shrub produces dense berry clusters that also make wonderful additions to floral arrangements and displays.

Gilbert started an experiment two years ago with a “mobile orchard” of columnar apple trees. “We plant the rootstock and bud it right in the field,” he said. “The second year, we harvest the fruit and sell or donate it to local food banks and homeless shelters.”

Second-year plants are dug and sold, and the orchard moves to a different part of the farm. “Our assumption is that moving them around will help keep the pests at bay,” he said, adding...
that the harvest is great. “We harvested over a ton of fruit last year.”

Research stations
OSU Hood River County Extension Office has created an outreach program to help orchardists by addressing the issue of poorly tended private trees that harbor insects.

“It is challenging for homeowners to control codling moth,” Extension Horticulturist Steve Castagnoli said. While growers seek alternative measures to control pests with newer, safer methods, they are faced with infestations of codling moths, a “key pest” for pear and apple trees.

“It is essential to fully implement integrated pest management (IPM) programs and make orchardists less reliant on chemical solutions,” he said. “But backyard trees often harbor insect pests and diseases that spread to neighboring orchards, which can cause additional economic hardship to the growers and the fruit growing district as a whole.”

Hood River’s program to mitigate the problem includes encouraging homeowners to choose resistant varieties, like Sunrise and Blake’s Pride pears, and asking owners to take out or manage existing trees. Public support for the project has been strong, according to Castagnoli. About 60 percent of locals with trees have voluntarily removed them or have taken steps to control codling moth in their trees, he said.

Wholesale growers
Carlton Plants LLC, in Dayton, Ore., produces thousands of bare root fruit trees for retail garden centers and rootstocks for growers all over the country.

“Right now, the commercial fruit tree business is good, so demand for bare-root stock is good, and the demand for shade trees is down,” said Dick Bocci, national account manager. “It happens whenever the economy is bad.”

As a business, Carlton Plants traces its roots to fruit trees, but over the years, as demand changed, the nursery redirected its focus and increased pro-
duction of shade and ornamental trees for the commercial landscape industry.

Now fruit trees and rootstock account for a smaller percentage of the business, but there is still demand from garden centers and from orchardists, many of whom are replacing older trees with cultivars grown on dwarfing rootstock, such as the M-9 series. These very dwarf trees can be planted much more closely together and they fruit prolifically and precociously, so they increase production per acre.

They are not freestanding rootstocks, though, so trees have to be supported—a small concession, compared to climbing ladders to tend the trees and harvest the fruit.

Carlton targets customers at retail garden centers, too. “We used to try to grow the newest selections, but we found that they didn’t sell,” Bocci said. “Customers ask for the old-fashioned varieties, names that are familiar. New names are passed by, until they gain a good reputation.”

Honeycrisp is a good example. Now the number one most popular apple, Honeycrisp enjoyed success at local and farmer’s markets and benefited from “great marketing,” Bocci said. When crops of great fruit hit the stores, demand for Honeycrisp trees “took right off.” Pink Lady is another apple that has taken off well.

Blue Heron Farm Nursery grows fruit and nut trees, many of them hardy enough for cold climates, in a relatively new pot-in-pot system. According to company literature, “These trees target the demand for a larger, more established tree” to challenge smaller trees typically found in chain stores. They have larger caliper, established branch structure, potential fruit bearing, and a root system well established in a 10-gallon or larger container. ©

Elizabeth Petersen writes for gardeners and garden businesses, coaches students and writers, and tends a one-acre garden in West Linn, Ore. She can be reached at gardenwrite@comcast.net.