

Growing Loquats in Coastal Mississippi

The loquat tree is in the Rosaceae family, along with many other fruiting trees, such as apples, peaches, plums, and pears. The scientific name of the loquat tree is *Eriobotrya japonica*. This species originated in central and southern China. Although it is a fruiting tree in areas with subtropical or Mediterranean climates, it is often planted as an ornamental in regions with colder temperatures. Since loquats are not grown on a large scale in Mississippi, cultivar availability may be limited.

Space loquat trees about 25 feet apart in full sun. The tree has a short trunk and a rounded canopy. Pruning will maintain a desired tree height and shape. Unpruned trees can reach heights of 20 or 30 feet, whereas pruned (topped) trees will stay between 6 and 12 feet tall. The leaves are in whorls and are thick, evergreen, and large, growing up to 15 inches long (**Figure 1**).

Well-drained soils with slightly acidic pH are necessary for loquat trees. Since mature trees are in some stage of growth year-round, they should be fertilized three times per year, once just before bloom, once after harvest, and again in early summer. A common fertilizer such as 6-6-6 will suffice. A mature tree can require 10 to 15 pounds of fertilizer per year. It is always best to perform a soil test first to better determine the fertilization needs of your specific site.

Loquat trees do not need a lot of water; in fact, over-watering will hurt the trees. Mature trees need water during extended dry periods and when the fruit is developing. Young trees should be watered more frequently to ensure survival.

Flowering occurs in the fall and early winter. Flowers are white, fragrant, and arranged in panicles that may contain up to 100 individual flowers. The timing of flower production is problematic for fruit production in Mississippi. Temperatures below 27°F can kill both flowers and fruit. The tree itself is far more tolerant of cold temperatures, as it can survive temperatures down to 10°F, but leaves may suffer damage at this temperature.



Figure 1. Loquat leaves.

Insects, primarily bees and flies, pollinate flowers for fruit production. Loquats are self-compatible, meaning one single tree can produce fruit, but as with many fruiting trees, cross-pollination improves the number, size, and quality of fruit. Fruit production is irregular in Mississippi, but the fruit is excellent for jams and pies if it can be harvested.

Fruit size will vary with cultivar, anywhere from 1 to 3 ounces and 1 to 2 inches long. The outer skin is often slightly fuzzy and may be yellow to orange when ripe (**Figure 2**). The fruit flesh color and sweetness can vary, as well, from white to yellow or orange and 7 to 17 degrees Brix. Ripened fruit almost always has a few seeds (fewer than 10).

A mature tree can be very productive, producing 100 pounds of fruit or more per year. Expect fruit production to begin when trees are between 5 and 10 years of age.

Pests of loquats can be significant. Fire blight (*Erwinia amylovora*) is a bacterial disease that also attacks apple and pear trees. Selective pruning of the infected branches can be an effective control measure along with proper nutrient management. Fire blight attacks fast-growing, succulent tissue, so do not apply more nitrogen than is absolutely necessary.

Fungal diseases can also attack the tree and/or fruit. Loquat fruit insect pests include fruit flies and some caterpillar species. Other insects, such as borers and aphids, may attack the tree itself.

Weed control is crucial for survival of young trees. Mulching with bark, wood chips, or similar material will help control weeds and conserve soil moisture.



Figure 2. Ripe loquat fruit.



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