

Feeding a Passion for Passionfruit

One of my favourite fruits is the passionfruit. That tang is so distinctive and delicious. It conjures up my first ever taste as a five year old, sitting beneath an enormous vine, armed with a knife and a teaspoon. My playmates, owners of the vine, considered such snacking to be of no great moment, but for me, a love affair had begun.



Passionfruit vines are productive for five to seven years, although a well-cared for plant may last longer. Plant a new vine when your old one is about three years old, ensuring that a fruiting replacement will be there when the old vine runs out of productivity. The fruit falls from the vine when it is ready, so harvesting just means picking it up every day or so.

Growing passionfruit in Inverleigh is a bit of a challenge, since they do not like frost or wind and they need lots of water. Planting against a support that absorbs heat during the day and gives it out at night, such as a water tank, brick wall or metal shed, is a good option, particularly if it also provides protection from early morning sun, which causes damage when it heats up frosted cells quickly. Whatever their situation, young plants should be covered on frosty nights.

Passionfruit vines are vigorous growers and need a strong support such as a fence, pergola or arch. They will grow up trees and over bushes if not controlled. An interesting idea is to plant a passionfruit beneath a wattle tree, choosing a tree that has nearly had its day. The vine will grow up into the tree and be protected from frost to some extent by the tree's foliage. Being a legume, the wattle's root system should provide a good environment for the passionfruit, with lots of health giving fungi and microorganisms and a ready supply of nitrogen. The tree and the vine will likely come to the end of their days at the same time.

Passionfruit plants grown from seed or cuttings will have their own roots. If you purchase a plant which has been grafted on to a different root stock, take care not to disturb or damage the roots to prevent suckers. Suckers need to be cut off at the root, with the roots then being directed downward. Our plant is a 'Nelly Kelly', suited to cooler areas and self-pollinating. Plant flowers, such as lavender, nearby to attract pollinating insects. Passionfruit flowers are stunning.

Mix compost into the planting hole and feed with compost, manure and organic matter in spring and autumn, along the whole length of the vine. Mulch well to conserve water and to prevent competing weeds. Passionfruit plants need regular water over summer so planting near the house, where saved water can be used, is handy. Find a sheltered spot with soil that drains well and plenty of sunshine.

Plant a passionfruit in spring in our district, to allow it to establish before the first winter; autumn planting is fine for frost free areas. Tie the vine to the support initially. Do not prune the vine until it reaches the height you want and then pinch out the top tip to promote side growth. Future pruning in spring is to clean out dead, diseased and spindly wood, open the vine up to air and sunlight and to prune back 15 - 30cm, in order to promote new growth for fruit formation. Passionfruit plants fruit after 12 to 18 months.

So, while growing passionfruit is not really 'a piece of cake' in our district, it can be done and the rewards are certainly worthwhile. Think of passionfruit sponge, passionfruit butter, passionfruit flummery, fruit salad with that special tang, pavlova toppings, Brazilian passionfruit cake, passionfruit and mint cooler – and of course, the good old knife and spoon combination that hooked me all those years ago.