

Hardy kiwifruit, better than the fuzzies

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Hardy kiwifruit (*Actinidia arguta*) is cousin to the fuzzy, market kiwifruit (*A. deliciosa*), with some similarities and some differences. A big difference is the “hardy” part. Fuzzy kiwi plants are hardy only to Zone 7 and need at least 200 days to ripen their fruits. Hardy kiwifruits are hardy to Zone 4 and ripen their fruits in 150 days. (Actually, there are two species of so-called “hardy kiwifruits;” the other, *A. kolomikta* is hardy to Zone 3 and ripens its fruits in 130 days but has commercial limitations that keep it from consideration here.)

Hardy kiwifruits are small, grape-sized, but with smooth, edible skins so can be popped into your mouth like grapes. Inside, the fruits look the same as the insides of fuzzy kiwifruits. The flavor of the two is very similar, except that hardy kiwifruits taste better, with more sweetness and aroma.

Every plant has some limitations, so, before going further, let’s get hardy kiwis’ out of the way. The plants are rampant vines, so need trellising for good management. Most common, and the way I grow them, is on a 5 wire, T-trellis with 5 to 6 foot wide cross arms. Annual pruning is needed, during the dormant season and then, ideally, a few times during the growing season. Hardy kiwifruit plants are dioecious, so (nonfruiting) males are needed to pollinate females, which do fruit. One male can sire up to about eight females. Although the plants are quite winter cold-hardy, growth begins early in the spring and that early growth is susceptible to late frost injury. Flowering can still occur following some injury, depending on the growth stage and the degree of injury. In my experience, plants seem more frost tolerant as they age.

The above limitations aside, hardy kiwifruit are relatively easy to grow. A number of varieties are available. Anna (Ananasnaya) is a common commercial variety; Dumbarton, Geneva, and MSU are others, ripening earlier, an important consideration the further north plants are grown.

Pests or diseases generally do not pose any problems with hardy kiwifruit. As such, they are well-adapted for sustainable or “organic” production and marketing.

The goals in training and pruning are to make a potentially tangled mass of rampant shoots manageable and easy to harvest, and to keep a vine fruitful by allowing adequate light to fall within the plant canopy. Pruning also stimulates an annual flush of new wood, important because flowers and, hence, fruits, are borne only toward the bases of shoots of the current season that grow from the previous year’s canes. An established actinidia vine consists of a trunk, 2 permanent cordons running in opposite directions along the middle wire of the trellis, and fruiting arms (or canes). Fruiting arms grow perpendicular to the wires and cordon, and are tied down to drape over the outside wires.

Annual pruning consists, first, in shortening the ends of the cordons each winter to prevent further elongation, and then in maintaining a supply of fruiting arms. The fruiting arms give rise to laterals that bear fruit at their bases; during each dormant season, these laterals are shortened to a few buds beyond the point at which they fruited---eighteen inches long is about right for each lateral. When a fruiting arm with its lateral, sublateral, and subsublateral shoots is

two or three years old, they are all cut it away to make room for a new fruiting arm originating directly from the cordon.

Summer pruning is aimed at keeping vines in bounds, maintaining order, and letting the shoots bask in light. Repeated summer pruning, as needed, is required through the growing season, paying special attention to the vine during the critical, early part of the growing season. When a vine is getting enough sun, the ground beneath should be in dappled shade.

A mature hardy kiwifruit vine can produce one hundred pounds of fruit. Harvested fruit will ripen off the vine, but only after achieving a certain level of maturity. Sweetness and firmness are two indicators of when a fruit is ripe for picking. A refractometer reading of eight to ten percent soluble solids is one indicator; another benchmark of when to harvest is when the first fruits on a vine start to soften.

Mature, unripe fruit will be hard, but will soften and sweeten in a week at room temperature. If the fruit is refrigerated to near freezing, and humidity maintained at ninety-five percent, the fruits will keep for many months! Let firm-ripe fruit soften before eating.

A marketing plus for hardy kiwifruits is that they can ride on the coat tails of fuzzy kiwifruits, with which consumers are familiar. The best selling point for hardy kiwifruit is their delectable flavor.

For more details on the history, cultivation, and varieties of hardy kiwifruits (as well other interesting and commercially viable, “uncommon,” fruits), see my book *Uncommon Fruits for Every Garden*, Timber Press, 2004.