American plum seedlings

Blackford Valley Farm | Planting guide

American plum (*Prunus americana*) is a native, spring-flowering shrub or small tree that can spread into a dense thicket. Its ripe plums are useful for fresh eating and preserves, and its blossoms and cover benefit wildlife. Seedling fruit size, flavor, and yield vary.

Site and growth

- **Form:** Often roughly **10–20 feet** tall, with roots that send up new stems. Give it space to spread, or plan to mow unwanted suckers. This is a strong choice for an edge or wildlife planting, not a tight ornamental row.
- **Light and soil:** Full sun encourages flowering and fruit. It tolerates varied soils, but good drainage and moisture during establishment help; avoid a persistently wet planting hole.
- **Climate:** Native American plum is generally suitable for much of the Midwest. Check the planting site's hardiness zone and local frost exposure; a late freeze can damage early blossoms.

Soil, roots, and water

NC State describes **average, dry-to-medium, well-drained soils**, including clay, loam, and sand, with acid-to-neutral pH categories. Clay is suitable where roots remain aerated, not in a persistently saturated hole; a safe flood duration is unknown. No numerical pH optimum is established here. Strongly alkaline ground is outside those listed categories: test pH and investigate nutrient availability before choosing amendments or assuming good fruit production.

Allow aerated soil for the spreading, suckering root system; compacted layers, shallow rock, and standing water limit usable rooting space. Drought tolerance of an established thicket is not drought tolerance of a newly planted seedling. Check beneath mulch and water slowly when the planted root zone starts drying, especially in the first growing seasons. Let excess water drain; prolonged saturation can injure roots and cause decline or death. Mature plants need less routine watering, but severe drought can reduce shoot growth and fruit development.

Moisture-retentive, drained soil and full sun support healthy stems, flowering, and developing plums, not a guaranteed crop. Pollination, frost, and genetics still matter. Watch for black knot, cankers, brown rot, and plum curculio; poor soil or yellow leaves alone does not diagnose these problems. Remove diseased material with locally appropriate Extension advice and keep enough space for air circulation.

Planting for fruit

Plant **several genetically different seedlings** together to improve pollination and yield. Early blossoms support insects; fruit also attracts birds and mammals. A thicket provides nesting and escape cover. Pick fully ripe fruit for eating or jam; individual seedlings may produce tart or small plums. If the planting borders pasture, keep livestock away from damaged or wilted *Prunus* foliage.

Plant your potted seedling

We sell and recommend **potted seedlings**. Our planting method requires a **square hole, not a round one**. A wider hole is preferred, not required; it must fit the root ball without squeezing it. Dig no deeper than the root ball in its pot, and shallower as needed to leave the **top of the root ball slightly above surrounding ground level**. Rest it on firm soil so it does not settle too deep. Water the pot before removal; support the root ball, not the stem, and keep it together. Check for circling roots rather than forcing a root-bound ball into the hole. Backfill around the sides with native soil, taper soil to cover exposed side roots, and water thoroughly. Keep the root flare exposed; do not pile soil or mulch over the ball's top or against the trunk. Check both the root ball and nearby soil for moisture while roots establish.

Protect and establish

Young plums need protection from deer, rabbits, mice, and voles. A staked tree tube protects a single stem while it grows, but a **tall cage with a fine-mesh lower guard** may better accommodate the plant's spreading form and new suckers. In either case, secure the bottom against rabbits and rodents and check for tunneling, nests, and bark chewing: small animals can kill a young tree. Keep a grass-free area around each plant for its first seasons, mulch away from the stem, and water through drought. Thin or mow outward suckers later if a contained row is desired.

A good fit for

Native hedgerows, wildlife borders, and mixed fruit plantings where a spreading patch is welcome.

Learn more

Use the soil-location map to screen survey pH layers, drainage, water storage, and rooting restrictions where recorded. Survey estimates are not a soil test or field inspection of the planting spot. Check actual depth and seasonal wetness and test before amendments. The map does not measure current moisture or predict fruit yield.

- US Forest Service: American plum ecology
- NC State Extension: American plum uses and habitat
- NC State Extension: soil depth, aeration, pH, and nutrient availability
- University of Minnesota Extension: establishment watering and mulch
- Penn State Extension: shelters and rodent protection