
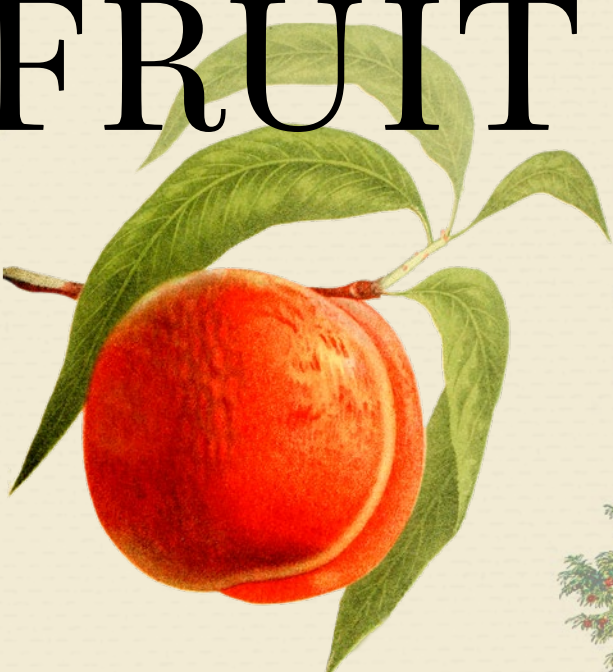


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# TAMING FRUIT

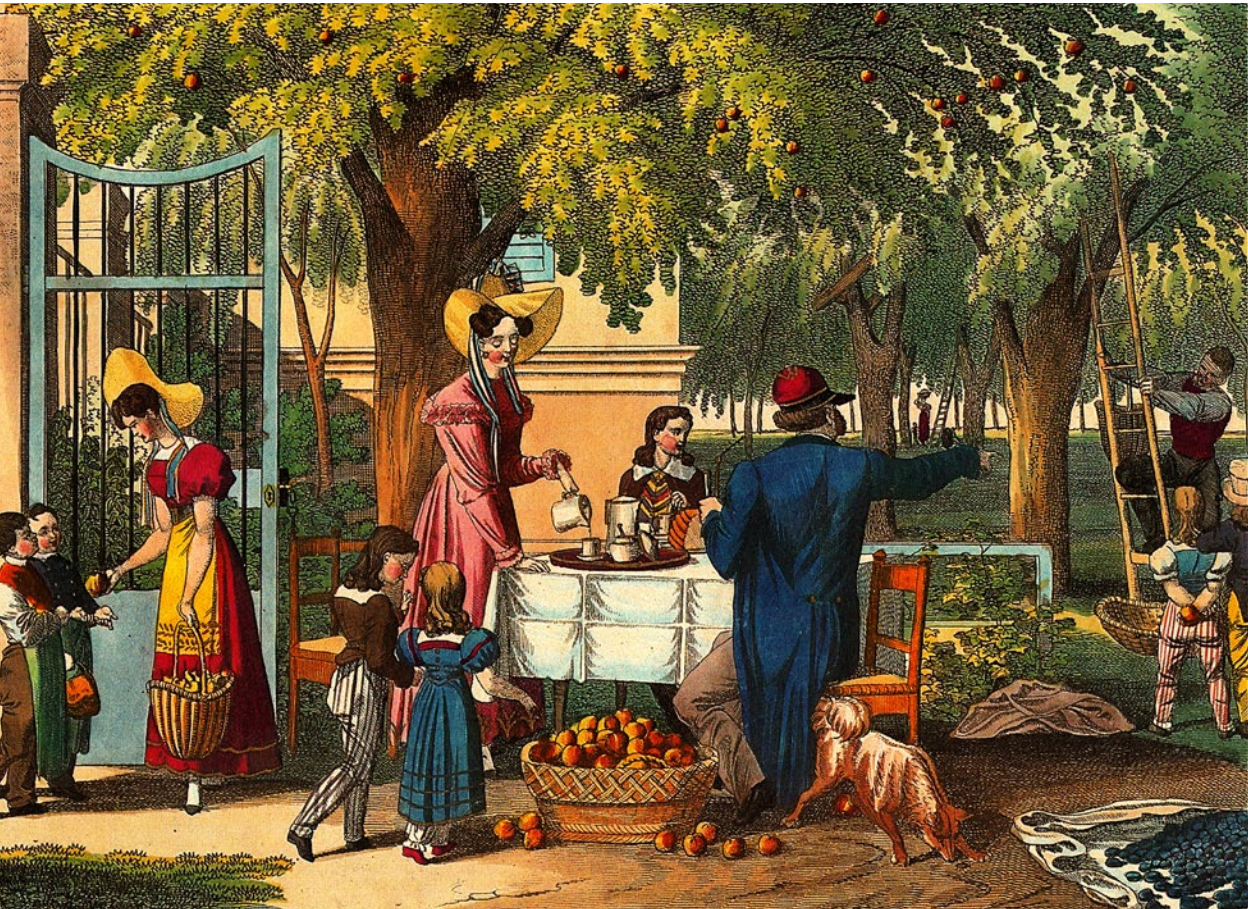


How Orchards Have  
Transformed the Land,  
Offered Sanctuary,  
and Inspired Creativity

**BERND BRUNNER**



# Taming Fruit



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BERND BRUNNER

Translation by **LORI LANTZ**



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Vancouver/Berkeley

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— PROLOGUE —

# The Seeds for This Book



ACCORDING TO HENRY DAVID THOREAU, “When man migrates he carries with him not only his birds, quadrupeds, insects, vegetables, and his very sword, but his orchard also.” Efforts to cultivate fruit trees have historically connected regions and continents—and continue to do so today. As a result, they involve the interplay of time periods, landscapes, and nations. This book provides an overview of the different types of orchards that have existed throughout history and the principles by which they were organized. After all, the form that an orchard takes reflects the conditions of the time in which it was created. I will also endeavor to paint a picture of the life and work that took place among the trees, along with the thoughts that they inspired.

Places where various plants (and trees) are grown are often divided into two categories: ornamental spaces that fulfill an



aesthetic purpose and productive spaces where the emphasis is on the harvest. In this way of seeing, ornamental gardens are works of art, while those where luminous fruit swells beneath the canopy of leaves are the products of labor. Is this really the case? Can't an orchard—at least one not cultivated on an industrial scale—be beautiful? In this book, we will discover gardens and orchards that blur the lines between these supposedly clear categories. After all, many ways exist to shape these spaces: the interplay of light and shadow, paths that unfurl before the wanderer, places to sit, perhaps a little hut offering shelter from sudden rain, a swing.

But no matter how well designed, how much care is lavished on it, or how productive it might be, an orchard is by nature impermanent, even though it may exist near a human settlement for decades or more. As soon as fashions change, food is sourced from elsewhere, or the owners move away and no one feels responsible, other plants begin to take over. Eventually, all signs of the orchard disappear. But even when lost orchards no longer appear on any map, they did exist. They have a history.

Perhaps it makes sense to think about an orchard as a kind of stage—one where a highly specific drama plays out between fruit trees and their caretakers, whoever they may be. Viewed in this way, orchards invite us to enjoy the complex spectacle of fruit growing and ripening in the company of animals, people, and other plants.

THE IMPETUS FOR THIS book came from an article that I discovered several years ago in a recent French book about the history of fruit cultivation. One of the many topics covered was Gesher Benot Ya'aqov, an archaeological site in the northern Jordan valley. Researchers there discovered stone tools and a variety of organic remains, among them various fruits and nuts, including acorns,

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**previous page**

When the Dutchman Pieter Hermansz Verelst painted this young lady in the seventeenth century, it was fashionable to pose with fruit.



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**left**  
The avocado or  
“alligator pear,” early  
nineteenth century.

almonds, water chestnuts, and Mount Atlas mastic (*Pistacia atlantica*), an evergreen shrub related to the pistachio.

The remains found at Gesher Benot Ya’aqov were estimated to be about three hundred thousand years old—a number so seemingly unbelievable that I had to read it several times. It meant that the finds came from the Paleolithic era, roughly one hundred thousand years before *Homo sapiens* likely arrived from the African savannas. At that time, half of Europe and North America were

buried under a layer of permafrost. What is more, as more recent research suggests, some of these remains might be considerably older than that.

A look at a map confirmed my vague suspicion: as luck would have it, I had firsthand knowledge of the area. At one point in the mid-1980s I found myself near the Sea of Galilee in northern Israel. I spent a few weeks at the kibbutz Ami'ad (which means “my people, forever”) above the sea, not far from Jordan and the Golan Heights. The Gesher Benot Ya'aqov site is just over six miles (ten kilometers) away.

The fruit trees grown at Ami'ad were not native to the region. I was assigned to help with the harvest of one such import, the avocado. This highly nutritious pear-shaped fruit originated in the forests of Mexico and spread from there to Brazil, probably with the help of now-extinct giant ground sloths. Archaeological evidence shows that people were already using them around six thousand years BCE, but first began actively cultivating them about a thousand years later. Because of the fruit's reptile-like skin, English speakers originally called avocados “alligator pears.”

The kibbutz's avocado grove of at least a few hundred trees was located outside the main settlement. The six-foot (two-meter) trees with their wide-reaching branches stood lined up in rows, as far apart as the trees were tall. Most of the fruit could only be reached with a picker, and here and there we had to climb up into the branches. We fought our way through the thick, dark-green foliage of the crooked, twisted trees to pull—or often, twist—the still rock-hard avocados from the branches. The green buttery flesh of their ripe counterparts was served at dinner every night. I quickly grew tired of eating avocados and the many calories took their toll, but there simply weren't many other options. This overabundance is a common theme through orchards in history and, as I was to

discover, people came up with ingenious ways of processing fruits and nuts to vary their taste and texture, and to preserve them as year-round sustenance—but despite these efforts often also found themselves with diets as monotonous as mine.

The tantalizing information in the French article mentioned earlier seemed like a sign to investigate further. I was fascinated by how very long ago someone had gathered the ancient fruits and nuts found at this site. Although we can't be certain which group of early humans left these remains (*Homo erectus*, *Homo heidelbergensis*, or even, perhaps, soon-to-be Neanderthals), what we do know is that even back then in the Lower Paleolithic, our ancient ancestors were picking and processing bounty from the wild.

When I contacted the author of the article, archaeobotanist George Willcox, about this site, he pointed out that the Mount Atlas mastic enjoyed by our distant ancestors continues to be eaten and used today by people in Syria, Turkey, and beyond. After the Stone Age, it was one of those fruit-bearing trees that provided much more to the communities that valued it than simply food. It played and continues to play its part in both commerce and pleasure. Its sap can be processed into alcohol, medicines, perfumes, and incense. Its bark contains tannins for processing animal hides, and its sturdy root system continues to be important in preventing soil erosion in dry and dusty parts of the world. The fruit of another species in the genus—*Pistacia vera*—are the pistachio nuts that we are familiar with. In eastern Turkey, *Pistacia vera* trees are grafted on *Pistacia atlantica* rootstock, which is local and sturdier.

I BEGAN TRACING THE history of orchards because I wanted to better understand the coevolution of fruit trees and humans. This shared process changed both participants. Obviously, eating delicious fruit enhanced humans' meals and thus their lives. As a result,

people influenced the structure of the trees and their ability to produce desirable fruit, making them even more attractive. And beyond the trees and fruit themselves, humans are connected to the land where their orchards grow—land where they not only planted, watered, and harvested but also conversed, lived their lives, and enjoyed themselves.

Based on everything we know about the origins of agriculture, the cultivation of fruit trees often went hand in hand with a settled home in the vicinity. Marked off and secured as a productive piece of land, it became part of the property of a specific family or clan. And wherever the precious trees and bushes grew, their owners developed practices for gathering the bounty they produced. They plucked fruit from the trees; combed berries from the bushes; shook apples, cherries, or plums from the branches; or even beat the trees to get them to release nuts and olives into nets or onto the ground. With a little imagination, the rustle of wind in the leaves as you walk under fruit trees or through olive groves even today evokes the bustle of these early communities as they feasted on this fresh harvest or processed it into oil or dried fruit that would nourish them through more barren seasons.

THROUGH THE AGES, THE biological growth of fruit has been accompanied by a long historical development that can rightfully be compared with the domestication of dogs, cattle, or chickens. Michael Pollan formulated an intriguing theory along these lines: not only has human cultivation changed plants, but plants have affected us as well—in a process that almost seems conscious.

The Egyptian botanist Ahmad Hegazy and his British colleague Jon Lovett-Doust pursue this idea further, asserting that

*as far as plants are concerned, we are simply one of thousands of animal species that more or less unconsciously “domesticate” plants. In this co-evolutionary dance (and in common with all animal species including humans), plants must spread their offspring to areas where they can thrive and so pass on their genes.*

They go on to argue that

*in the game of evolution for crop and garden-ornamental species, humans have selected and bred plants for their desired attributes—including size, sweetness, color, scent, fleshiness, oiliness, fiber content, and drug concentration.*

In *On the Origin of Species*, Charles Darwin described a mechanism applied “almost unconsciously” by generations of past orchardists and gardeners:

*It has consisted in always cultivating the best known variety, sowing its seeds, and, when a slightly better variety chanced to appear, selecting it, and so onwards.*

The results are works of art created through the combined effort of countless people, toiling in forgotten orchards in the depths of history, always working in an alliance with the forces of nature. Seen in this light, fruit is a generous offering provided by trees—to all animals, who have also contributed to the selection of especially useful or enjoyable varieties, increasing their value—and of course to humankind.

