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How to grow your own coffee

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Coffee beans grow on the Coffea arabica plant which is related to gardenia, ixora and coprosma. It?s a beautiful small tree to about 5m (15ft) high with glossy green leaves and jasmine-scented white flowers that appear along the stems in summer-autumn. As the fruit develops along the stem, it starts off green and then changes to a bright red cherry-like fruit, finally maturing to a dark brown. Although coffee is a small tree, you can prune it to a 2m (7ft) shrub, which is how they?re kept in coffee plantations. This pruning also encourages lateral branching and more flowering and fruiting.

So, what sort of micro climate do you need to grow coffee? Coffee prefers temperatures between 15 and 24 degrees C (60-75F), although if it?s within the range of 7-30 degrees C (45-85F), it will still grow quite well. Choose a shady spot, sheltered from cold or hot winds. Frost is the big enemy in cooler climates, and below -2 degrees C (28F) will probably kill the plant. The good news is that home-grown coffee doesn?t get any pests or diseases.

If you?re in a cooler climate, you can certainly grow coffee in a pot, and wheel it into a sheltered position for winter months and if you?ve got a greenhouse, even better. Almost any type of reasonably good soil is OK as long as it?s slightly acid (pH6), doesn?t get waterlogged, and isn?t dry and sandy. You can even grow coffee as an attractive indoor pot plant and still expect some beans.

For garden-grown plants, it has to rain at the right time of year, which for coffee is in winter-spring. Like murraya, coffee flowering is controlled by rainfall and as little as 8mm will force a new flowering and fruit-set through spring and early summer. New rain events can trigger another flowering so you?ll often find flowers and ripening fruit on the tree at the same time, as the fruit can take 6 months from autumn right through to spring to change to red. Cooler conditions promote the longer ripening periods. While your coffee tree will tolerate dry conditions it won?t flower and fruit without regular watering.

Late spring is the perfect time to plant your coffee tree. You should get your first crop of coffee beans in about 3 years (6 years from seed) but you?ll need about 30 plants for enough beans for a daily cup. You could even think about a coffee hedge in a shady part of the garden. Six weeks after planting apply 100g of a complete citrus fertiliser per tree, and keep doing that every 6 weeks during the warmer months as coffee trees are heavy feeders. On small plants, when it?s about 500mm (20?) tall prune off the growing tip to encourage lateral branching. In many coffee plantations, heavy-cropping coffee trees are cut almost to the ground every 3 years to encourage vigorous new growth, which is then thinned and tip-pruned to restore the bushy habit.

Read more about harvesting and preparing coffee at http://gardendrum.com/2013/10/03/how-to-grow-your-own-coffee/ [1]

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