

Q: I would like to grow cherimoyas. What kind of conditions do they like?

A: Mark Twain once characterized the cherimoya as “deliciousness itself!” Sometimes called custard apples, the flavor has been described as a blend of strawberry, banana and pineapple, with a little guava to cap it off. .

In order to grow Cherimoyas successfully you must reproduce the growing conditions where this delicious fruit originated. This tree is native to Andean mountain valleys in South America: in Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador and Columbia, and can now be found throughout most of South and Central America. The fruit has been grown in Spain and Italy which have similar mediterranean climates to ours. In the late 1800’s trees were planted in California, but the 1937 freeze wiped many of them out. Cherimoyas are sub-tropical trees, but will tolerate light frosts, suffering damage at 29F (2 C) and mortality at 25F (3.5C). In their native mountains the trees get between 50 and 100 chilling hours a year which is necessary for dormancy.

They prefer being planted in the ground at a slight elevation, in a sunny, south facing, frost-free location. Breezes from the Pacific are welcome as are the cool nights our climate usually blesses us with. If you live in an area with frequent strong winds, the trees will need protection. They tolerate most soils, but must have decent drainage, with an optimal pH range from 6.5-7.6.

Cherimoyas need regular watering when they are growing, but should not be watered when they are dormant or they become very susceptible to soil born decay. This can be a bit of a problem since our rainy season overlaps with the winter dormancy.

If your tree thrives, it can become 30’x 30’, (1Mx1M), forming a dense canopy. The trees will lose their leaves for a short time in the winter, leafing out by late February. Flowers appear on new and old growth from spring till mid-summer. You will need to learn to pollinate the flowers by hand as the natural pollinators are not found in California. Complete instruction on hand pollinating area available from the CHERIMOYA fruit facts from California Rare Fruit Growers <http://www.crfg.org/pubs/ff/cherimoya.html>, as well as pruning and fertilization details

You can start your cherimoyas from seed, taking about 40 days for the seed to germinate if kept at 70F, (21C), moist, and heated from the bottom. Seedlings are usually grafted the year following planting with known good varieties. Your local CRFG chapter will be able to help you find a grower with available scion wood.

