Q: How can I tell how many chilling hours my area receives?

A: Chill hours refer to the hours of time a deciduous fruit or nut tree spends with temperatures between 32° and 45°F. Chill hours are necessary to break dormancy, which is the state of rest that these trees enter during the winter months in response to growth inhibitors. Growth will not occur even if the temperatures rise, which prevents the trees from beginning to grow during atypical warm weather when they could be damaged by normal cold temperatures later in the winter or early spring. When sufficient cold temperature breaks down the growth inhibitors in the trees, growth resumes. This is called vernalization, "chilling,' or "winter chill." Different varieties of trees need different numbers of hours to break dormancy. Most of northern California gets between 800 and 1500 hours each year, but some of the warmer coastal and Bay side areas may receive fewer. Check before purchasing fruit and nut trees to make sure that your area gets enough winter chill for the trees to bloom and set fruit. Some varieties such as apricots are unlikely to bear if they do not receive enough chill hours. If you are in a low chill area, look for trees that are tolerant to your climate. The Fruit and Nut site at UC Davis http://fruitsandnuts.ucdavis.edu/ has a list of low chill trees and a weather tab that lists totals of chill hours. Look for the link to the paper Temperate Tree Fruit and Nut Varieties for Planting in the Home and Garden Landscape, which lists varieties that do well in our area.