Japanese Plum / Loquat
*Eriobotrya japonica*

**Loquat has many uses**
Multi-tasking applies to more than busy people. Plants can do double duty as well. Loquat trees are a good example. They are a small attractive shade tree with fragrant flowers and spring fruit, the subject of this week's column.

According to Osceola County Extension Agent Eleanor Foerste, the loquat may be considered for Florida Yards that are cramped for space but seeking fast shade. Loquats are ideal for small yards as they only grow to 25 feet tall. They have large dark green leaves and naturally form a spreading umbrella shape suitable for creating shady areas for benches or swings.

Despite their name, Loquats are not related to the citrus plant, kumquat. Instead, they are distant cousins to apples and pears. Another name for this tree and its fruit is Japanese Plum, which gives a hint of where this plant originated.

Loquat trees bloom in the early winter. This year I've seen bumper crops of Loquat fruit in our area. If the blooms are damaged by temperatures below 28°F they may lose the winter fruit crop, but the trees will survive.

Large clusters of small fuzzy yellow fruit are found on loquats from February through March. Their oval shaped fruit is sweet and juicy, and they usually have only a single pit. Fruit can be eaten fresh or made into preserves. Pinch off the blossom end, squeeze the seed out and pop the fruit in your mouth for a tasty treat.

While these broadleaf trees are considered evergreen, they also lose leaves all year long. If placed away from turf areas, leaf pickup tasks can be reduced by leaving a mulched bed area under the tree. The large brown leaves are not as obvious in a brown mulched bed as they are on a green lawn. Mulch decomposes and enriches our sandy soil as it holds moisture and nutrients. Keeping them away from sidewalks and drives also avoids the problems of cleaning up unharvested fruit as well.

Loquats are best suited to full sun areas and well drained soil. Avoid planting them in soggy areas. They will do well in either sweet (alkaline) or sour (acid) soils.

If Loquats are grown from seeds, the fruit will be slow to appear and their quality will be unpredictable. If possible, look for named varieties such as ‘Gold Nugget’ or ‘Champagne’. ‘Oliver’, ‘Wolf’ and ‘Tanaka’ are also favorites at nurseries which specialize in tropical fruits.

If a friend has a tree with tasty fruit, air layering can be used to produce a clone of your friends’ desirable tree. Air layering is a fun way to grow roots on the tree’s stem while it is still attached to the
tree. The mother plant provides water while the shoot is developing roots so survival is often higher than with rooting cuttings from the tree.

Here’s how to air layer a Loquat. Remove a few leaves between 8" and 12" from the shoot tip, leaving a 4" to 6" stem section exposed. Scrape the bark from a one inch section of the stem all the way around. Applying a small amount of rooting powder on the cut area with a small paint brush or cotton swab speeds up the rooting. Pre-soak with water two hands full of sphagnum moss then gently squeeze to remove dripping water.

Hold the sheet of plastic wrap in your hand and place the clump of wet sphagnum moss on top. Press a crease in it and fold it around the cut part of the stem. Hold the plastic tightly and secure the bottom edge to the stem with a wire twist tie. Carefully fold the edges of the plastic together to form a good seal in the moist moss. (This wrapping process is easier if an extra set of hands is available.)

The plastic holds the moss against the cut stem and provides a moist place for roots to grow while it is still attached to the original mother plant. Many experienced propagators also cover the plastic with foil to prevent sunlight from damaging tender new roots. Birds are also sometimes known to peck at the worm like roots.

Watch for the roots grow inside the plastic. After a month or so, when the roots fill the moss, cut the shoot BELOW the rooted area so the new cutting has roots. Don’t cut above the roots or the new plant will lack roots. This rooted cutting can be grown out in a pot for a period of time before it is planted in the yard.

Loquats are easy care plants which require little pruning. Fertilize once or twice a year with any garden or fruit fertilizer. Water may be needed during dry winter and spring weather when fruit is forming, but avoid overwatering.

Keep an eye out for fruit flies that can attack loquat fruit. Fire blight disease is a problem some years. This bacterial disease attacks young shoots and causes them to turn brown and dead leaves hang on the stems. To stop this disease, trim out damaged stems well into green tissue. To avoid spreading the disease, dip pruning clippers in a dilute bleach solution (one part bleach to 9 parts water) between cuts.

Home gardeners can have it made in the shade by selecting loquat as an edible shade tree. I’ve placed more information on Loquats on our Okeechobee web page, [http://okeechobee.ifas.ufl.edu](http://okeechobee.ifas.ufl.edu).

*by Dan Culbert - Extension Horticulture Agent Okeechobee County*