

RECIPE FOR PEACH PIE IN THE DESERT

by Janet Ruth // Illustrations by Tim Foley



Find an open spot of ground. If one does not exist, use shovel, repurposed polaski, and a pair of heavy gloves to tear out one of the myriads of sand sages.

Dig a hole. Try to remember all those rules about protecting your back. Do you lift with your legs? What about now, when the hole is getting deeper? Pile the dirt — OK, the sand — next to the hole. Keep digging. When you hit a root the size of your wrist from that freaking “mystery *Prunus*” — the one that has never produced a flower, let alone a fruit with which to identify it, but does offer perches and shelter for the birds coming in to the feeders — pick up the polaski again and hack away in your best imitation of Paul Bunyan. Hope you don’t cut off your toes. Wonder if you should be wearing steel-toed boots rather than Crocs. When you think the hole is deep and wide enough . . . keep digging. Remember that kid in kindergarten who told you that if you dug far enough, you’d reach China. Look for an upwelling of salt water. Wonder if you are

hallucinating in the heat. When you are on the verge of collapse, decide that it's close enough to the prescribed dimensions. Note that the pile of sand looks twice as large as the hole it came from.

Melt onto a patio chair. Drink a gallon of water. Note that you still don't feel like peeing. Pull yourself upright using the shovel handle. Try to pick up the 30-lb. bag of dried cow manure. Manage to lift it six inches off the ground before it falls back with a thud. Remember how you gave your husband a hard time when he suggested he could help you carry the manure and the tree out to the designated spot — you pointed out that you'd managed without him for at least 45 years. Something about a woman and a fish and a man and a bicycle. Regret your Wonder Woman attitude, but grit your teeth and mutter under your breath, *I'm going to do this if it kills me!* By straining, lifting the bag, and humping it two feet at a time, manage to get the bag of manure out to the hole in just under a half hour.

Hack the bag open with the shovel because you forgot the utility knife in the garage but are too tired to go back and get it. Dump half of the bag onto the pile of dirt (yeah, yeah — sand). Mix vigorously with a wooden spoon — oh, I mean a trowel. Shovel several inches of the mixture back into the bowl — no, hole. Pull the crumpled nursery instructions from your pocket and read that it's better if the soil is moist before planting the tree. Trudge back to the patio, fill a watering can from the spigot — too full — spill half of it on your feet as you stumble back. Be glad you're wearing rubber Crocs. Pour remaining water into the hole. Remember the half hour with the bag of manure and go get the wheelbarrow. Load the 10-gallon pot containing a young peach tree into the wheelbarrow, making sure to lift with your legs. Throw a dirty look toward the house where your husband is surely taking a nap, slumped in his over-stuffed chair. Hate him momentarily, even though you assured him you could do this by yourself. Only dump the tree over once when the wheelbarrow trundles over a rock. Remove the potted tree from the wheelbarrow and place next to the hole.

Grasp the trunk firmly while holding the pot between your feet. Saying a silent *namaste* to your yoga teacher for all those exercises squeezing a yoga block between your knees while in bridge pose, lift the tree and its root ball free of the pot. Place next to the hole and groan, because you forgot the utility knife again. This time you really need it, so stomp back through the house to

the garage. Slam the screen door on purpose, hoping to wake up your husband. Feel small-minded but slightly gratified.

Back at the hole, run the knife along the sides of the root ball. Pull the roots out and apart, remembering how the tree guy said that the reason your cottonwood is dying is because you didn't do enough of this when you planted it and the roots have grown in a circle, strangling the tree. When the root ball looks a bit like Medusa with snaky roots sticking out all over, grasp the trunk again and lift it into the hole. Curse when you realize it's too deep in the hole. Heave it back out, forgetting to lift with your legs. Curse again when you feel the twinge and know that you'll be making an appointment with the chiropractor tomorrow. Shovel more sand-manure mixture into the hole. Replace the tree—better this time. Add more mixture around the tree to keep it from leaning.

Decide that you should add some compost from your bin to provide the soil-wildlife that doesn't come in a bag of manure from the store. Fill a bucket with crumbly compost that still has a blue-moldy orange rind and a really disgusting half-composted potato that spoiled in the back of the refrigerator. Suppress a gag response, but smile at all the roly-polys and squirming earthworms. Feel only a tiny bit sorry that you cut one of the worms in half and just make sure that both halves are in the bucket. Use the shovel to rescue the lizard that is skittering around the bin in panic and deposit him outside. Suspect that he will climb back in as soon as your back is turned. Lug the bucket back to the pit. Finish filling the hole, alternating the wormy compost with the sand-manure mixture. Tamp it down with your fists, then stomp carefully around the trunk to settle everything in place.

Grab a bag of bark mulch from behind the shed. Channel that Wonder Woman character that got you in trouble before and toss the bag across your shoulder. Be glad it's not as heavy as the manure or the tree. Fill the well with 2–3 inches of bark. Cut a piece of chicken wire off the roll with wire snippers. Curse again when it rolls back up on itself, dragging two long bloody gashes along your arm. Finally get the wire wrapped around the trunk rather than your arm. Know that neither the freaking rabbits nor the rotten rock squirrel will be able to strip its tender bark. Add five tablespoons of root stimulator to the watering can and fill with water. Lug to the tree and pour over the bark mulch. No need to stir. Repeat two more times.

Sit down in the dirt next to your new peach tree. Admire your handiwork. Wonder what you're going to do with all the extra dirt, which still looks like more than could have come out of that hole. Shrug and decide that, like Scarlett O'Hara, you'll think about it tomorrow. Clean all the tools and take them back to the shed because that is what your Dad—Wonder Gardener—taught you to do. Besides, it looks like rain—another notable event in the desert.



Trudge back into the house. Look at that beautiful peach pie recipe from *Bon Appétit* with the gorgeous photo of a pie whose crust was undoubtedly made with prohibited wheat flour (gluten) and butter (dairy). Your mouth waters, your stomach grumbles. Go back and look at the nursery instructions to see how long it will take before the tree produces peaches. . . .

Because you are very hungry and you're pretty sure you can't wait two to five years, wake up your husband and send him to Whole Foods to get a peach pie with a vegan, gluten-free crust from the bakery.

Done.



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