

## Growing cacao trees in South Florida

If you're one of those people who want to experience growing your own and you are up for a “green” challenge, then consider growing a cacao tree. Growing cacao plants at home is a rewarding experience that will help you learn and appreciate the work involved in its production. Start from your own seed, which are easy to propagate, or you can find plants available in local nurseries in our community.

1. **Where to plant the tree:** Select an area protected from wind. They are tolerant of shade.
2. **Selecting a tree:** You can grow your own tree from seeds or get a healthy plant. They are produced by nurseries in Florida.
3. **It is better to plant more than one tree:** Self-incompatibility of cocoa flowers may result in little to no pod production
4. **Planting a tree:** Dig a big hole about 2 feet deep to allow the development of a good root system.
5. **Amend the soil:** Plant the tree and fill it with nutrient rich soil.
6. **Time of Production:** The cacao tree will bear in 4 years. The fruit and the time from flower pollination to a fully developed pod takes 5 to 7 months or more.
7. **Cold protection:** A cacao tree grows in the tropics about 20 degrees north and south of the equator. Cold protection should be provided to young trees.
  - Mulch
  - Watering the cacao tree before a freeze can help protect it before cold night.
  - Coverings are an additional option, cloth sheets, and quilts.
  - Covers that extend to the ground and are not in contact with plant foliage can lessen cold injury by reducing radiant heat loss from the plant and the ground.
8. **Fertilizing:** Use a granular 8-3-9 at the end of March, June, August and October. Spread lightly around the drip line.
9. **Pruning:** Cacao trees can become moderately large if not pruned to contain their size.
  - Remove low branches to provide ventilation to trunk where tree blooms and fruits.
  - Prune dead branches behind the point of discoloration.