

PRUNING FRUIT TREES

Fruit trees can be pruned from now through March as long as the wood isn't frozen. Following are some general recommendations on pruning mature fruit trees followed by more specific instructions on each species. There will be two fruit tree pruning workshops this year that are free and open to the public. The first one will be on Friday, March 11th, at 10:00 AM at the Numana Community Garden at 700 N Gordy. The second one will be Saturday, April 2nd, at 10:00 AM at Pioneer Bluffs in Matfield Green. After a short presentation on pruning and a demonstration or two attendees will be able to practice what they have learned under supervision. Bring your pruning and lopping shears, bypass only, and learn how to care for your fruit trees.

General Recommendations

- Take out broken, damaged or diseased branches
- If two branches form a narrow angle, prune one out. Narrow angles are weak angles and tend to break during wind or ice storms.
- Take out all suckers. Suckers are branches that grow straight up. They may originate from the trunk or from major branches
- If two branches cross and rub against one another, one should be taken out.
- Cut back or remove branches that are so low they interfere with harvest or pruning. If cutting back a branch, always cut back to another branch or a bud. Do not leave a stub.
- Cut back branches to reduce the total size of the tree, if necessary.
- Thin branches on the interior of the tree.
- Control the height, usually 11 to 12 ft.

Specific Instructions

Peach and Nectarine: Peach and nectarine require more pruning than any other fruit trees because they bear fruit on growth from the previous year. Not pruning results in fruit being borne further and further from the center of the tree allowing a heavy fruit crop to break major branches due to the weight of the fruit. Prune long branches back to a shorter side branch

Apple: Apples tend to become overgrown if not pruned regularly. Wind storms and ice storms are then more likely to cause damage. Also, trees that are not pruned often become biennial bearers. In other words, they bear a huge crop one year and none the next. Biennial bearing is caused by too many fruit on the tree. Though pruning helps, fruit often needs to be thinned as well. The goal is an apple for about every 5 inches of leafed out branch.

Cherry, Pear, Plum: Light pruning is usually all that is needed. Simply remove branches that are causing or will cause a problem according to the general recommendations above.

Pruning Young Fruit Trees

Young fruit trees should be pruned to begin developing a strong structure of the main or scaffold limbs. This will help prevent limb breakage over the years when the scaffolds carry a heavy fruit load. Apple, apricot, cherry, plum and pear trees generally are trained using the central leader system. The growth pattern for these trees is for a center branch to be dominant and to grow straight up. Peach and nectarine trees are normally pruned using the open center method because they do not have a strong tendency for one shoot or branch to dominate the growth of other shoots or branches. In this system, the tree is pruned vase-like with no central leader.

Regardless of the system used, the three to four scaffold branches should:

- Be no lower than 18 inches from the ground. This makes it easier to prune and harvest the tree once it matures.
- Form wide angles (about 60 to 80 degrees) with the trunk. Wide angles are much stronger than narrow angles and are less likely to break under wind or ice loads.
- Be distributed on different sides of the tree for good balance.
- Space 6 to 10 inches apart on the trunk with no branch directly opposite or below another.

Pruning Overgrown Apple Trees

Apple trees that are not pruned for several years will often produce so many branches that little energy is left for fruit production. Overgrown apple trees are also difficult to harvest and spray. Gardeners who have such a tree are often at a loss as to how to get it back in shape.

Often the best recommendation for such a tree is to make one pruning cut at ground level and start over with a new tree. However, trees may have sentimental value that'll make rejuvenation worth the time and effort. Realize that this will be a multi-year process because no more than 30 percent of the tree should be removed in one year. Here are some steps to follow:

- 1. Remove all dead wood.** This does not count toward the 30 percent.
- 2. Remove suckers from the base of the tree.**
- 3. Choose approximately six of the best branches to keep as scaffold branches.**

Branches should be cut flush to the branch collar. The collar is the natural swelling that occurs where a branch connects to the trunk or to a larger branch. Removing the collar would leave a larger wound that would take additional time to heal. Do not paint wounds. Wounds heal more quickly if left open. Candidates for removal include branches with narrow crotch angles, which are more likely to break in wind and ice storms, and those that cross branches you will save. This may be all that is possible the first year if the 30 percent threshold has been reached.

- 4. Thin the branches on each scaffold branch.** Remove crowded branches to open up the tree to light and allow humidity to escape. Shorten each scaffold branch by cutting back to a side branch. When you are through, the tree should have enough wood removed so that a softball can be thrown through the tree. Severe pruning often will cause an apple tree to produce vigorous side shoots from the trunk called water sprouts. Main branches will also produce suckers that grow straight up. The suckers and water sprouts should be removed throughout the growing season so the center of the tree stays open. Removing water sprouts and suckers is the most time consuming and difficult practice necessary to bring an overgrown apple back into shape.

Fungus Gnats

Fungus gnats are small insects (1/8 to 1/10 inch long) that are common in high-organic-matter houseplant soils that are kept moist. Though adults are mosquito-like in appearance, they do not bother humans or pets. It is actually the larvae or maggots that can injure plants by feeding on the roots. Symptoms include sudden wilting, loss of vigor, poor growth and yellowing leaves. Use of sterile media and avoiding overwatering can help prevent infestations. Existing infestations can be controlled *Bacillus thuringiensis v. israelensis* (Gnatrol).