The Grapevine

Fruit Tree Care

There is nothing better than eating a peach or cherry picked straight from the tree in the summer. Growing up my family had a small orchard of apple, peach, plum and cherry trees that we would pick from to freeze so we could enjoy that fresh summer taste all year round. While growing fruit on trees sounds like it should be easy, there are some important steps and care that we had to do every year in order to prevent diseases and keep our trees as healthy as possible. Even though there is still snow on the ground early February through March is the time to do some maintenance pruning on our fruit trees.

One of the most important tips for keeping your fruit trees healthy and productive is to prune them on a yearly basis. Some of our fruit trees such as pears or plums will need little pruning every year while others such as peaches will require regular pruning to maintain the strong structure needed to support fruit. When pruning it is important to remember what your goals are:

- The first goal is to develop a strong branch structure to support the fruit. Trees with a weak structure are likely to break with heavy fruit loads or ice storms.
- The second goal is to allow light and airflow into the tree canopy. Sunlight is needed to set fruiting buds for the next year while airflow through the canopy helps to reduce the chances of disease in your trees.
- The third goal is to control the tree size. Smaller trees are easier to prune, pick fruit from, and to spray for diseases and bugs. Many fruit trees you can purchase now are dwarf varieties but it’s still important to keep fruit trees the size you want and can maintain.
- The final goal is to remove diseased, dead or broken branches. High winds, ice storms, diseases, heavy fruit loads, insects and wind storms can all damage the trees. Removing those broken branches can help speed up the healing process and prevent future problems.

When pruning fruit trees there are some general recommendations that we make.

- Remove branches that have narrow attachment angles to the tree (See photo to the left) Those are likely to break from the weight of fruit or ice. Cherry trees are notorious for having brittle branches and narrow crotch angles so it’s important to prune those trees when they are young to develop a strong structure.
- Remove water sprouts, the branches that grow straight up inside the middle of the tree and suckers which grow from the base of the tree. These branches won’t produce fruit and simply clutter up the tree.
- If there are two branches that rub together, remove one of them. Those wounds open the tree up to disease and insect issues. Be sure to prune all the way back to the collar of the branch so you don’t leave a stub. The stubs will eventually fall off but you have lengthened the healing time needed for that plant.
- Remove branches growing back into the tree. These could rub against other branches and they clog up the tree’s canopy reducing the airflow.
- Remove a maximum of 30% of the tree’s canopy a year. Pruning back too severely can lead to an increased number of water sprouts and reduce the amount of fruit that you will get. If you have a very overgrown tree it’s best to trim it back over several years rather than all at once.
There are some differences in how to prune the different types of fruit trees. See these recommendations from Ward Upham below:

**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 regularly 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 extra weight. Prune long branches back to a shorter side branch to prevent the branches from getting too long.

**Apple:** Apples tend to become overgrown if not pruned regularly. Trees that are not pruned often become biennial bearers where they have a huge crop one year and none the next year. 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 about every 6 inches. Spacing can vary as long as the average is about every 6 inches.

**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. You can use “spreaders” on young branches to improve the crotch angle for a stronger tree.

Pruning fruit trees can be intimidating if you have never done it, but the benefits to your orchard and fruit trees in terms of fruit production and reduction in disease or insect issues will be noticeable. K-STATE has several publications that can offer guidance with pruning. Click on the name of each publication to read it. The first publication is on **Apples and Pears** and the second is on **Peaches, Plums, Cherries and other Stone Fruit**. If you would like to watch a video on **Pruning Fruit Trees**, check out the link from the Kansas Healthy Yards and Communities.

**Reminders**

- During warm spells this winter, be sure to water newly planted trees and shrubs in your landscape. Even trees that have been planted in the last 2-3 years will benefit from some watering during the winter. An easy method of watering is to take a 5-gallon bucket, drill a 1/8” hole in the bottom and place the full bucket near your tree to let the water drip out. After it empties move it to the other side of the tree and fill it again. Be sure to try to water at least 12” into the soil if you are using a sprinkler system. Deeper watering is more important than frequent watering to encourage the new root system to grow.

- We are approaching the time to spray for Peach Leaf Curl. Usually we can wait till March to spray for this disease, however if we have an extended warm period in February, the peach buds can begin to swell and lead to spraying in Late February. Peach leaf curl is a disease that results in puffed, swollen and distorted leaves. The disease can weaken tree due to leaf drop in the spring, however it is easy to control with a timely application of fungicides. The fungicide needs to be applied before the buds swell so keep an eye on those temperatures. Only spray when the temperatures are above 40 degrees. There are several fungicides labeled for this disease including chlorothalonil (Ortho Garden Disease Control, Fertilome Broad Spectrum Fungicide, GardenTech Fungicide Disease Control and Daconil). Thoroughly cover the entire tree during application. Note that it is much easier to achieve good spray coverage if the tree is pruned before spraying.

**Upcoming Events**

- **February 19th, 2022: Fruit Tree Pruning**
  Fruit tree pruning can be intimidating to a newbie or maybe you bought a home with an older fruit tree that is overgrown. Carl Jarboe, a local horticulturist and expert, will walk you through pruning fruit trees as pruning is necessary for a tree to thrive and produce abundant fresh fruit. At the training, attendees will learn how to set the base structure of a fruit tree and reasons behind pruning. After the demonstration we will supervise as everyone tries their hand. Participants should bring their own pruning tool and we will talk about sanitation and proper pruning. Contact our office to register as the class is limited to 15 participants!!! Register at: https://kstate.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8Bo3J9Vfs9rncr4

- **March 2, 2022: Landscape Design 101**
  Designing a new flower bed or revamping a current one can intimidate any gardener. With just a few simple design principles, become more confident in choosing plants for these areas. Join Travis Carmichael, Lyon County Horticulture Extension Agent, as he discusses design principles, including the importance of planting in groups, planning for mature size, and bringing year-round color to the landscape. For more information or to register click here.