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. We have a stretch of warm weather over the next couple weeks and 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 fruited 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 likely 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. (See middle left of photo)
- 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.

**Activity of the Week - Seed Balls**

No those are not cookies in the picture to the right, those are actually seed balls or seed bombs depending on who you talk to. Seed balls are a unique but fun way to plant seeds in your yard. They are easy to make and most of the time can be made from components you already have around the house. Once they are dry and the weather warms up kids love to toss them into flower beds to “plant” the seeds. Seed balls are made from powdered clay, potting soil, seeds and water. I would also recommend wearing plastic gloves. The recipe that was recommended to me by a Master Gardener uses the following parts:

- 2 parts powdered clay
- 2 parts potting mix
- 1 part seeds of your choice
- Water
- Plastic Gloves

Measure the powdered clay, potting mix and seeds into a plastic tub. Slowly and gradually add water, mixing with hands, making the consistency of play dough. Roll small amounts of mixture into round balls. Place them in a flat with non-stick paper and let dry. May take up to a week. Toss after last frost into desired area. Let the rain or your own watering take over. The seed balls will start disappearing and you will see seedlings appear.

**Reminders**

- 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 puckered, 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.
- Don’t forget to turn your compost pile throughout the winter and make sure the pile is staying damp to encourage the breakdown of the material.
Upcoming Events

- **March 1st at Noon - Houseplants: Basics and Beyond**
  Over 66% of U.S. households have at least one houseplant, but often the terms used to describe their care can be confusing. Join Cassie Thiessen, Post Rock District Horticulture Extension Agent, & Calla Edwards, Butler County Horticulture Extension Agent, as they decode common houseplants terms related to light, water, and other plant needs. Learn about some unique houseplants and the best practices to keep them thriving. For more information on the Garden Hour series [click here](#).

- **March 6th at 7 pm - Planning and Problem Solving in the Garden**
  Gardening has become an extremely popular activity in the United States. Many of the biggest issues that gardeners have start with not planning the garden out and getting it started correctly at the beginning of the year. Join us to learn the basics of planning the garden from where to plant to when, why rotating plants is important and to cover some basic problem solving for the most common issues that gardeners face. This event will be at 7 pm at the Augusta United Methodist Church at 2420 Ohio Street, Augusta, KS.

- **March 14th at 6 pm - So you want to grow vegetables in containers?**
  Are you interested in growing your own vegetables but live in an apartment, have a shady backyard or have a physical limitation that prevents you from gardening in the ground? Container vegetable gardening is a great way to still grow your own vegetables on your window sill, patio, porch or even your front step. Join us at the Bradford Memorial Library to learn how to grow your own tomatoes, corn, herbs and any vegetable in a container.

- **April 5th at Noon - Growing to New Heights with Vertical Gardening**
  Make the most of your garden by growing up, instead of out. Create vertical gardens to get your garden off of the ground, provide more space for plants, and expand your gardening area. Join Amanda Groleau, Frontier District Horticulture Extension Agent, as she shares the benefits of vertical gardening. Learn which fruits, vegetables, and flowers will grow best in a vertical garden and how to get started. For more information on the Garden Hour series [click here](#).
K-STATE
Research and Extension
Sedgwick County
DESIGN & GROW
GARDENING WORKSHOP

Held at the
Sedgwick County
Extension Center, 4-H Hall
7001 W. 21st St. N., Wichita

SATURDAY, MARCH 4,
2023

Morning:
• 9 a.m. to noon
• 3 tracks of gardening lectures
• $10 by Feb. 24th, $15 after

Afternoon:
• 1:30 to 3:30 p.m.
• Choose from 3 hands-on workshops
  ○ Indoor Seed Starting
  ○ Composting
  ○ Lawn Mowing Clinic
• Additional $20 by Feb. 24th, $25 after

See the complete schedule and register at
sedgwick.ksu.edu/events

2023 HARVEY COUNTY
HOME AND GARDEN SHOW
$1.00 Admission; Under 12 Free
SATURDAY, MARCH 25, 8:30AM-5:00PM
SUNDAY, MARCH 26, 12:00PM-5:00PM

Dyck Arboretum of the Plains
177 W. Hickory St.
Hesston Kansas

K-STATE
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This Location is a Smoking/Tobacco Free Area