

THE GRAPEVINE



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February 14th, 2019

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.

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.
- It is preferred to cut back to a branch rather than a bud as cutting to a bud will cause several buds to begin growth. Much of this growth will likely need to be removed later.
- Cut back branches to reduce the total size of the tree, if necessary.
- Thin branches on the interior of the tree.

Follow the steps above in order but stop if you reach 30% of the tree.

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. Peaches are the exception to the rule and can be cut back more than 30%.

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 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.

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 will make revitalization 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:

First Year:

1. Remove all dead wood. This does not count toward the 30 percent.
2. Remove suckers from the base of the tree.

3. Choose six of the best branches to keep as scaffold branches. Remove all others. 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. Summer pruning should be done the first year as the tree will react to severe pruning. Specifically, the tree will likely produce numerous suckers and watersprouts. Remove all suckers (growth that arises from the base of the tree or from roots) as they appear during the growing season. Watersprouts are the growth that appears on major branches and grows straight up. These should be removed during the growing season as removing during the next spring will just encourage more watersprouts to appear during the growing season.

Second Year:

1. 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.

2. Remove suckers and watersprouts as was done the first season. Removing water sprouts and suckers is the most time consuming and difficult practice necessary to bring an overgrown apple back into shape.

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.

Do not prune the year of planting except to cut back and unbranched tree to a height of 36 inches. This will cause side branches to develop. If there are already side branches, do not prune the year of planting so the tree has the maximum number of leaves to help with establishment.

Apple 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, cherry 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 to a vase-like pattern with no central leader.

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

- o Be no lower than 18 inches from the ground. This makes it easier to prune and harvest.
- o 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.
- o Be distributed on different sides of the tree for good balance.
- o Be spaced 6 to 10 inches apart on the trunk with no branch opposite or below another.

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