

Pruning Fruit Trees

Properly training and pruning fruit trees is one of the essential steps in growing a healthy fruit tree and maximizing fruit production. If properly done you will see an improvement in fruit quantity and quality, a more uniform ripening of the fruit, fewer problems with disease and insects, and a longer living, healthier tree.

Pruning fruit trees:

- Helps develop a strong framework for the tree, allowing it to support more fruit production.
- Removes dead, diseased, and broken limbs.
- Maximizes light penetration, which is essential for flower bud development, and optimal fruit set, flavor, and quality.
- Allows adequate air movement through the tree, which helps the tree dry more rapidly, minimizing the chance of disease infection.
- Leads to a more thorough penetration of insecticides and pesticides, meaning fewer problems with disease and insects.
- Improves the overall aesthetic value of the tree.

Remember, every fruit tree is different, and therefore pruning will be slightly different for each as well. There are however, a few general tips you can follow to properly train and prune your fruit tree, which will help to maximize the overall enjoyment of your purchase.

When should I prune?

The best time to prune a fruit tree is late in the dormant season, or in other words, as late in the winter as possible. This is because in the fall when the tree goes dormant, it will store most of its energy in the trunk and root system. Thus, removing a portion of the tree in the winter will leave the tree's energy reserve unchanged. Then in the spring, when the tree's energy reserve is tapped, it will respond to pruning by producing vigorous new growth. The reason pruning should be done as late in the dormant season as possible is that this will minimize winter injury.

Summer pruning can be practiced, but should only be done to thin vigorous, current season growth. Pruning in the summer should be limited because it directs the tree's energy towards tree growth, rather than fruit production. To minimize the potential for future winter injury, summer pruning should not be done after the end of July.

If you have multiple types of fruit trees, apple and pecan trees should be pruned first, followed by cherry, peach, and plum trees. Within particular types of fruit trees, tree age should be the primary factor with older trees being pruned first and younger trees last, as they are more prone to winter injury.

How should I prune?

When making a pruning cut, make it just beyond the bud or branch. These cuts are known as "heading cuts;" they will promote the growth of lower buds as well as terminal buds below the cut.

Sometimes a pruning cut will also be made to simply thin out the tree, giving vigor to healthier parts of the tree that are more likely to produce a better fruit crop. When making a "thinning cut," make it just beyond the base of the branch being removed.

Do not prune too close or cut into the trunk or branch, as this can lead to infection. Additionally, the pruning cut should be made at a backwards angle of about 30 degrees.

What should I prune?

Always remove any dead wood or broken branches, as well as any wood that rubs against other branches. Also, remove any suckers or shoots from the base of the tree.

When deciding which limbs or branches to prune off, remember to keep in mind that you are trying to maximize light penetration to all parts of the tree. If a branch is keeping another one from getting light, remove one of them. Also, remember to consider tree health by keeping limbs that are stronger and that you won't have problems with in the future. Branches that are more horizontal (closer to a 90 degree angle with the trunk) will be stronger than branches that are more vertical.

Other branch types that should be pruned include branches that are: downward growing, ones that are shaded and in the interior of the tree, and any competing tree leaders that form narrow branch angles.

Other general tips:

It is important to use the proper equipment when pruning to avoid injury to the tree. Always make sure that your shears or saws are sharp so that cuts to the tree are clean. It is recommended to use pruning shears on young trees and limbs that are less than a 1/2" in diameter, lopping shears for bigger cuts, and a pruning saw for mature trees.

Never prune too much at once rather spread the thinning over several years.

If pruned in the dormant season, dressing the wound of a cut is unnecessary.

When you are finished, remember to clean up all debris, as this can harbor pests and disease.

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Helping Hand Hints



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