

Pruning Fruit Trees
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Now that the weather has turned favorable it is time to not only think about but act on thoughts of pruning fruit trees. Dig out your pruning tools, clean them up, and sharpen them and get ready to start cutting. The best time to prune fruit trees is now until the first week of April. Time is running out. Prune while dormant to reduce the chances of diseases like fireblight and cankers. It is important to have good, sharp pruning tools as they will last much longer if properly cared for. For effective pruning a homeowner should have a pruning loppers, pruning secateurs (pruning shears), and a pruning saw. Always use tools designed for pruning and keep them sharp and clean.

Now that your tools are ready you can take to the outdoors and start pruning those trees. Take a good look at the tree for any diseased or broken branches. Prune those out first. Cut out any thin weak branches and any crossover branches to allow light and air into the canopy. By doing this your fruit will color better while ripening and make harvest much easier. Air flow through the tree will help keep diseases like sooty blotch and fly speck at bay. Remove any branches that have weak, narrow crotches and any that are drooping from the weight of last year's crop. Always cut just before a bud and on the upper side of the branch, allowing the future branch to grow upward instead of downward.

Any watersprouts (succulent, vigorous shoots growing upward on the inside of the tree) should be removed. Watersprouts act as a sink for nutrients and water and produce little fruit and sugar during photosynthesis. Any co-dominate leaders should be removed allowing the tallest and strongest leader to remain.

Proper pruning cuts will ensure that healing takes place quickly and efficiently. Make all cuts as close to trunk as possible, but just outside the branch collar, be careful that stem tissue is not injured. Cutting to the outside of the branch collar will seal itself in the shortest possible time. You will recognize the branch collar as the wrinkled or swollen area around the branch at its attachment point to the trunk or another limb. Cutting flush to the trunk will leave a large wound that will heal very slowly. Avoid leaving any stubs as these encourage rotting in the heartwood of the tree. When cutting large limbs; first undercut almost half way through a foot away from the trunk, then cut just to the outside of the first cut from the top until the branch falls, then cut off the stub outside the branch collar. This method will save the tree from bark ripping if the large limb is cut in one step.

Trees that have become too tall can be lowered by completely removing one or two of the tallest limbs. Make this cut where the limb joins the trunk. Remember you should never remove more than one-third of the wood in any one year. If a tree needs drastic pruning it is best to spread the work over several years. Never top a tree by removing all of the branches. Over-pruning will stimulate sucker type growth and will lower the strength of the tree and its fruit production.

Do not use a pruning sealer or wound paint, the use of these products may actually retard the proper healing of the pruning wound. By applying proper pruning techniques your fruit trees

will thrive for many years and produce lots of high quality fruit. So my advice to you is to get out and prune those fruit trees now before it's too late.

Source: Carl Hoffman, University of Minnesota Extension Educator, Stearns and Benton Counties

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