

Spring has officially arrived and with the change of season, numerous yard and garden activities will soon need to be accomplished. Before the mad-rush begins, there is still time to prune your fruit trees before they break dormancy and begin to grow. Fruit trees benefit from proper pruning, and it is best to prune them during the late dormant season. I am sure you have seen long-neglected apple or cherry trees that have never been pruned which continue to bear fruit. With that in mind, your question may be, why prune?

Experience has shown that in many fruit trees, problems arise that could have easily been prevented or remedied through good pruning. Not only does proper pruning head off potential problems in a tree, it also improves the tree's overall performance and vigor.

Pruning means simply removing a part of the tree to benefit the whole. When we cut away a branch or twig, it directly affects the tree's growth. Depending upon how it is done, pruning can accomplish the following:

- Produce new growth where it is desired
- Help control growth.
- Shape a young tree.
- Correct or repair damage.
- Help control insects and disease.
- Rejuvenate or reshape an older plant.
- Bring about earlier blooming.
- Increase the production, size, and quality of fruit.

These advantages make pruning well worth undertaking. Good pruning skills require knowledge and foresight. As a rule of thumb, never make a cut without a clear picture of its probable effect on the tree. At the same time, however, don't be so fearful of cutting that you cannot get the job done.

No pruning job can be done well without the proper tools. To start, you will need a good pair of pruning shears, and if you plan to make cuts larger than the shears can handle, you will need a lopper shear. A good sharp tree saw is needed for very large cuts.

There are several ways to prune and train the different fruit trees. Be sure to have the knowledge of what each cut will do to the tree before removing any of the plant material.

Commercial fruit growers prune fruit trees in three ways: vase pruning, modified central-leader pruning and delayed open-center pruning. The modified central-leader method is the most versatile and easily learned. Each method has its own advantages. Because of the different methods available, I suggest that before you begin to prune your trees, go to your local library or garden centers and seek publications that illustrate proper pruning techniques and methods.

Better yet, why not join us in Room B of the Extension building on Tuesday evening, March 29th at 6:00 p.m. and catch the last of the satellite Master Gardener training sessions. UNL specialty crops expert, Vaughn Hammond will present a program via satellite on *Fruit Tree Selection and Care*. The program will run from 6:00 to 9:30 p.m. Although originally designed for Master Gardeners, the public is welcome to attend at no cost.

If you have always wanted to know more about fruit tree selection and care, the opportunity to learn how is now.