



You know the saying; the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. Even though apple and other fall fruit harvest is nearing its end, that doesn't mean that the work is over. Fall sanitation is just one key part of fruit management. A little extra work now could ensure a successful growing season next year.

Make sure your fruit trees are ready for the winter to come. Start by making sure that your tree goes into winter with an adequate amount of moisture. The recommendation for trees is to have about 1 inch of supplemental water per week. This is about enough water to get the top 8 inches of the soil moist. Fruit trees do not require much fertilization, especially in the fall. In the fall we want trees to go dormant, not produce more growth, which is why we avoid fertilizing trees in the fall.

Fruit trees can benefit from good fall sanitation. Healthy fallen fruits or leaves can be collected and placed in the compost pile. Removal of rotting dropped fruit as well as diseased fruit and leaves will help decrease the potential for pathogens to infect next year's crop. Fruit mummies, dried fruits that remained on the branch, and diseased fruits and leaves should be picked up and thrown away, not put into the compost pile or worked into the soil. Branches that were infected with fire blight and other bacterial or fungal cankers should be removed and disposed of as well. Write down the diseases you had this season so you can plan preventative actions for next growing season.

Protect your fruit trees now for pesky critters. Mow the grass under the tree and as close to the trunk as you can get without causing damage. This will remove good overwintering sites for rodents. Also, be on the lookout for rodent paths or holes where they burrow. Before the ground freezes, consider protecting the tree's trunk as well. A well-constructed rabbit fence will help to protect smaller trees from becoming a bunny's next meal. Be sure that the fence is not only 15-18 inches tall, but it also should be buried in the ground 6 inches to keep the rascals from trying to dig under.

Strawberries could also benefit from a little care before winter. Thinning plants, providing adequate moisture throughout the fall, and mulching in late fall are all important fall care practices. Thin strawberry plants in mid-October and aim for a spacing of five to seven plants per square foot to help allow optimum fruit production the following year. Remove small and weak plants as well as any new runners or daughter plants that have not rooted down yet.

Mulching strawberry plants is another good practice to use. Winter mulch will help prevent or reduce winter damage to the crowns and flower buds of the plants. Wait to mulch strawberries until late November or early December, after the soil has frozen at a depth of 1/2 inch or the air temperatures have dropped into the 20's. Mulch applied too early in the fall can delay hardening off, which can lead to the plants being more susceptible to winter injury and possibly crown rot. Mulches that work well for strawberries can include wood chips, pine straw, newspapers, coarse sawdust, clean straw or hay, or any loose mulch that will not compact heavily. Leave the mulch on the plants until the new growth begins, usually in mid-April.

There are a few steps you can take to decrease the spread of pathogens. Machinery and tools should be disinfected on a regular basis and when they come into contact with infected plant material. Steam, hot water under pressure, or a 10 percent bleach solution can be used to disinfect. Before and after pruning out diseased branches, disinfect pruners and loppers to keep from spreading diseases.

With a little work now, you can ensure that your fruit trees will be the apple of your eye come next growing season.

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