

# Training and Pruning Peach and Cherry Trees

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Like all fruit trees, stone-fruit trees should be pruned to develop a strong, well-balanced framework of scaffold branches. Unwanted branches should be removed or cut back early to avoid the necessity of large cuts in later years. The pruning system best suited to stone-fruit trees is called “open center.” Pruning and training the trees to this system produces a vase-shaped tree.

- Open-center trees allow optimum air circulation and light penetration into the tree’s center, both important factors in reducing the development of brown rot on fruit; and
- Because stone fruit trees bear fruit on 2nd-year wood, the open-center pruning system also keeps the fruit-bearing surface close to the ground, accessible for pruning and harvest.

**Note:** Sweet cherry is usually pruned to a central leader system. Apricot and plum can be grown with either a central leader or open center. Spurs (compressed twigs) on plum, sweet cherries, and apricots can bear fruit for more than one year.

## At planting

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A whip or tree with no branches 20 to 30 inches above the soil line should be cut back to 26 to 30 inches after planting. Otherwise, your tree will grow major branches too high above the ground.

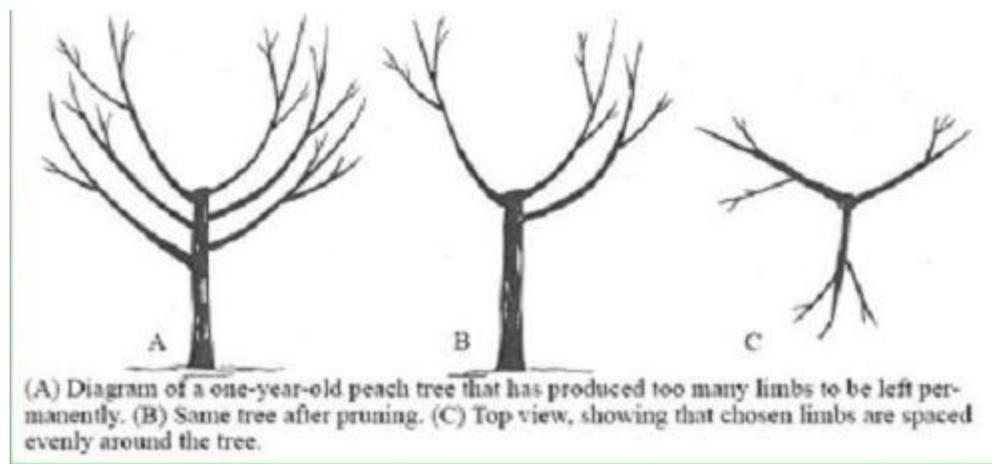
For trees with healthy branches 18 inches above the soil line:

- Select three or four scaffold branches, beginning at 18 inches, one at each compass point;
- Choose branches that are growing at a 60° to 90° angle from the trunk;
- Cut these scaffold branches back by one-half to a healthy outside-facing bud;
- Remove all branches that are less than 18 inches above the soil line;
- Cut the tree off just above the topmost selected branch; and
- During the summer, pinch off any shoots that begin to grow toward the center of the tree.

## Spring after planting

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Stone fruit trees are also very susceptible to a disease called *Cytospora* canker. If pruned in late winter, the tree cannot protect the pruning wounds from infection by this disease. **Prune your trees from budswell through petal fall in the spring.** Your goal is to develop a vase-shaped tree with no branches in the center.



Remove any broken or diseased branches and cut out any vigorous upright shoots that may have developed on the inside of the main scaffolds.

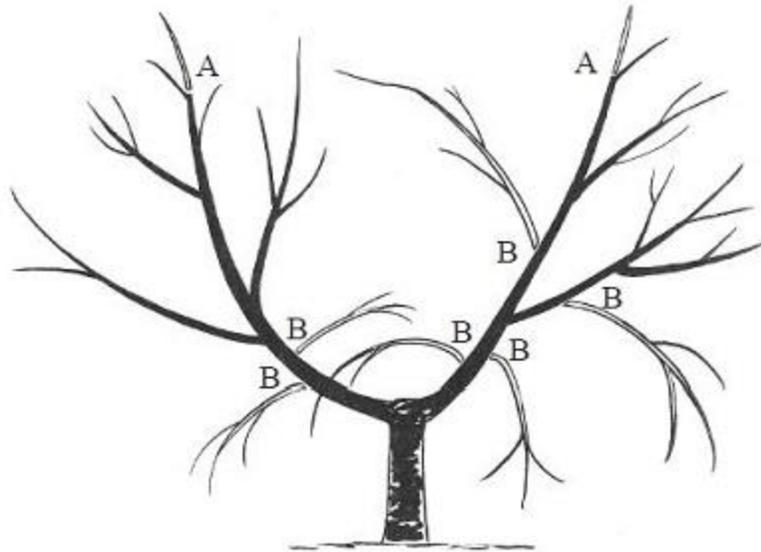
## Second spring

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During the second spring after planting, you can begin to develop secondary or sub-scaffold branches on the primary scaffolds.

- From each scaffold branch, select two to three limbs that developed during the previous summer;
- They should be spaced 6 to 8 inches apart along the branch;

- They should be 18 to 24 inches from the main trunk;
- Remove all other side limbs;
- Head the chosen side limbs, or sub-scaffold branches, back by one-half;
- Head back the primary scaffolds by one-half; and
- Completely remove any large, vertical limbs growing on the primary scaffolds, leaving only the moderately vigorous wood for fruiting



Pruning a two-year-old peach tree. This diagram shows a peach tree with corrective pruning cuts, which are needed beginning after the second growing season and continuing through the fourth year. Limbs drooping near the ground or growing toward the center of the tree are removed, as at “B”. Also, to keep tree growing outward rather than straight up, the highest limbs are headed back to an outward-growing lateral, at “A.” (For clear illustration, only two such limbs are shown).

### **Third and subsequent years**

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After careful pruning and training for the first two years, heavy pruning should not be necessary. Light, corrective pruning should maintain the open center.

- Thin out and shorten inside limbs to prevent shading of the center;
- Prune every year to keep the tree within its allotted space and to prevent limb breakage;
- Remove overly vigorous upright branches and leave moderately vigorous ones;
- Remove both short, thin shoots and very long shoots which are not as productive; and
- Head back limbs to encourage the development of new fruiting wood.

### **Pruning mature peach trees**

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As your peach trees begin to bear heavily, you must prune severely in order to stimulate new growth. Peaches are produced on the previous year's growth and the best fruiting wood is 12 to 18 inches long.

Limit the height and spread of older mature trees by removing large branches from the upper side of scaffolds, leaving only small fruit-producing shoots. Head back the primary scaffold branches to an outside-growing side branch. Remove or cut back damaged portions of larger branches. Maintain the open center to prevent shading of the interior portion of the tree.