

Fruit Tree Issues

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Once harvesting of fruit trees begins, questions about branch breakage from heavy crops, wormy apples and when to prune are common inquiries to Extension.

On trees with heavy fruit loads, removing some fruit to lighten the load is one option. Another is bracing branches with sturdy boards. This is about all that can be done now.

The best way to deal with heavy fruit loads is preventing them with fruit thinning in June. This reduces branch breakage, prevents alternate year bearing, and results in higher quality fruit. The more fruit a tree has to support, the smaller and less sweet the fruit will be.

In June, check fruit trees for needed thinning. As a general rule, most fruit is thinned to about six inches apart. This is an average for the tree or a branch so some fruit will be closer together if there are few on a branch. If a tree has a heavy crop this year, you may not need to thin next year. Trees tend not to produce heavy loads in consecutive years.

If apples are infested with worms, it is too late for control this year. Controls need to be used during egg laying, prior to worms boring into fruit. Avoid insecticide applications now. They will kill beneficial insects, like predators, and applications may be too close to harvest.

Codling moth is the most common apple pest that growers deal with. There can be up to three generations each year and for this reason egg laying can take place all season. However, the first generation in spring causes the most damage and management is targeted at these.

If insecticides are used, they need to be applied beginning at petal drop. Use products labeled for use on fruit trees and follow all recommendations for application timing and the waiting period between spraying and harvesting. Three to four applications should reduce the majority of codling moth caterpillars.

Multiple applications of insecticides is not a choice most homeowners prefer. To reduce applications, use codling moth traps next year to monitor for this pest. These are available from garden centers or can be ordered on line.

Codling moth traps are tent shaped plastic or waxed paper traps hung in apple trees. The inside is coated with a sticky material to trap moths. The bait is an artificial female pheromone that attracts male moths.

Traps are placed in trees in early May. Use tweezers or disposable gloves to handle the traps. If not, the pheromone may be transferred to another part of the tree. Check traps weekly for codling moths. Do an online search for an image of codling moth. If no moths are trapped, spraying is not needed.

If you prefer not to apply insecticides, one management practice that may reduce the insect population is picking up and destroying all apples that drop to the ground. This needs to be done promptly to prevent caterpillars emerging from infested apples to pupate into a new generation. Be sure to do this all summer.

Organic insecticides for codling moth include horticultural oil and spinosad (i.e Entrust). Even though these are natural, they are still insecticides. It is important to read and follow all label directions. As natural insecticides, more frequent applications are often needed.

One final note on fruit trees. Avoid pruning from now until late winter or early spring. Fall pruning delays a tree hardening off for winter and can lead to winter injury. Trees also do not respond to pruning wounds as quickly to begin the process of sealing the wound. This increases the risk of decay in wounds.