

Are Fruit Tree Sprays Needed

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New apple tree growers recently asked me if they needed to spray their apple trees. They were told they had to apply a fruit tree spray at least three times. The general answer to this question is if they don't want to spray, they don't have to.

Fruit trees are susceptible to a number of diseases and insects, but few will kill trees. If they are severe enough for a number of years in a row, some can weaken trees and reduce yields. However, home growers often choose to live with leaf diseases and some insects rather than apply a pesticide.

For the growers who inquired, I asked if their apple trees had a disease or insect issue last season. The answer was no. The trees are also only a few years old and we don't often see issues in young trees.

With most plants, we recommend not applying a preventive pesticide unless there was a problem the previous season. Especially since many of pest issues we can spray for will not cause long term harm in one season.

Once a tree has a foliar disease or fruits are infested, it is too late to attempt control. One needs to wait until the following season and apply products at the correct time, usually in spring, to prevent rather than cure the problem for that year. But only if growers chooses to.

My next question was if they had purchased disease resistant cultivars. Paying attention to this when selecting fruit trees is important. Select apple trees labeled as being resistant to cedar apple rust, apple scab and fire blight.

Disease resistance does not mean a plant will never be infected by a disease. It is less likely to be, and if it is, the infection is less severe with less leaf loss. Leaf spots caused by diseases do not harm a tree. The tree is only affected if the infection is severe enough to cause major leaf drop during summer.

If a tree holds the majority of its leaves until late summer and there is plenty of green tissue, the leaves are still photosynthesizing and do their job even if they have spots. And infected leaves will drop off during fall with a new set of leaves produced the following spring.

I also asked if the trees were producing fruit yet. If a tree is not old enough to produce fruit, there is no need to apply an insecticide to control insects that may infest the fruit.

Once trees begin to produce fruit, growers can wait to see if they have any insect issues. Our two main pests are codling moth and apple maggot. Eventually, these two insects may find the apple trees but it might take a few years.

Once apple fruits begin to be infested, the grower can then decide if they want to share some fruit with insects or try and manage them. If they choose to spray, timing of the application is most critical. Once the insect is inside the apple, it cannot be controlled.

For those who decide to use a fruit tree spray, select one labeled specifically for fruit trees and follow all label directions. The first application for foliar diseases is usually made just as the tree begins to leaf out. The first application for fruit insects is made soon after all flower petals have dropped. To protect pollinators, never spray trees during blooming.

One application can reduce diseases unless the spring is wet and rainy, then two or three may be needed. Because insects lay eggs for a longer period, more than one application is needed. But again, if a grower chooses not to spray and accept any damage that occurs, that is fine too.