

FRUIT and SHADE TREE PRUNING TIPS

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Productive fruit trees do not just happen. They result from good cultural practices including pruning, which is often overlooked. March and April are the months to prune fruit trees.

Hardy fruit trees like apple, pear and tart cherry can be pruned in March as long as temperatures are not too cold. Fruit trees susceptible to winter injury like sweet cherry and peach are best pruned in late spring just before new growth begins.

How to prune a fruit tree depends on tree type and what age of wood it bears fruit. For example, apples bear fruit on older wood. Once their main structure is developed, not much pruning is needed. In contrast, peaches bear fruit on new or young wood and require more pruning to encourage new growth.

For information on how to prune different fruit trees to increase yield, Nebraska Extension has a fruit tree pruning publication found at extensionpubs.unl.edu. Ohio State University also has a good publication titled 'Midwest Home Fruit Production Guide'.

The following are general pruning tips for developing strong branch structure; and for crown thinning to allow sunlight to penetrate into a tree to promote fruit production.

While I am writing about fruit trees in this article, the following can apply to young shade trees and I offer additional tips for them. If you have a large shade tree in need of pruning, hire a professional arborist for safety reasons.

Each winter, take time to observe trees for pruning needs and what they are. You'll be prepared for when the time to prune arrives in March or April. Regular monitoring, and pruning if needed, helps prevent problems and the need for too much pruning at one time.

When inspecting a tree, look for broken, damaged or diseased branches. These should always be removed first. Next, look for water sprouts which are sprouts that grow straight up off of a branch. They are common in fruit trees and need to be removed.

Once this pruning is completed, reinspect the tree for additional pruning needs. For crown thinning, look for any branches crisscrossing and rubbing against one another. If found, remove one of them. Check for branches growing towards the center of the tree rather than outward to further thin the crown.

Do not prune too much in one season as this can stress a tree. In fruit trees, it also stimulates excessive water sprout growth.

The rule of thumb is not to prune more than 25 percent during one year on shade trees. For fruit trees, less is better. If more pruning is needed, space it out over a few years. Dead or broken branches and suckers at the tree's base and water sprouts do not count towards the 25 percent.

On young shade trees, look for branches with ingrown bark. These are branches growing close to one another and forming a narrow fork. Ingrown bark makes a weak attachment. If found, remove one of these branches before it becomes too large.

When pruning lower branches off the trunk, keep the one-third rule in mind. The trunk of shade trees should make up one-third of the tree and the crown two-thirds. Don't raise the crown too quick or by too much.

If a tree is fairly young and has two leaders, known as co-dominant leaders, remove one of them. Ideally, this needs to be done at planting or within the first year or two after planting.