

FRUIT TREE PRUNING TIPS

From: Kelly Feehan, Extension Educator

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Productive fruit trees do not just happen. They result from good cultural practices including pruning, which is often overlooked. Here are some tips on pruning fruit and shade trees.

March is a good time to prune, as long as the wood is not frozen. Fruit trees susceptible to winter injury, like sweet cherry and peach, are best pruned in late spring just before new growth begins. Hardy fruit trees, like apple, are best pruned in March but February is okay too.

How to prune a fruit tree depends on the type of tree and 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 www.extensionpubs.unl.edu. Ohio State University also has a good publication titled 'Midwest Home Fruit Production Guide'.

For general pruning to develop strong structure, and for crown thinning to allow sunlight to penetrate into a tree to increase fruit production, here are some tips.

While I am talking about fruit trees in this article, the following also applies to shade trees. If you have a large shade tree in need of pruning, hire a professional arborist for safety reasons.

Before pruning, take time on a warm day to observe a tree to determine what needs to be pruned. This way, you'll be prepared for when pruning gets underway in March.

When inspecting a tree, look for broken, damaged or diseased branches. These should always be removed first. Next, look for suckers which are sprouts that typically grow straight up off a branch. These need to be removed.

Once this pruning is completed, reinspect the tree to see if more is needed. Are there any branches crisscrossing and rubbing against one another? If so, remove one of them.

Do you see branches with ingrown bark? These are often branches that form very narrow angles or crotches making them weakly attached. If found, remove one of these branches.

Are lower branches interfering with clearance or views? If so, gradually remove them to raise the crown. As a rule, the trunk should make up one-third of the tree and the crown about two-thirds; so don't raise a tree's crown too quickly or by too much. This applies more to shade trees than fruit trees.

If a tree is fairly young and has a double leader, also 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.

As far as how much to prune, the rule is not to remove more than 25 percent of a tree during one year. If more pruning is needed, space it out over a few years. Know that dead or broken branches and suckers do not count towards the 25 percent.

And finally, never treat pruning wounds with a wound dressing or tree paint of any kind. If you make correct pruning cuts, and don't prune too much at one time, the tree will wall off and seal the wounds on its own. Treating wounds interferes with this process and leads to decay forming in pruning wounds and spreading within the tree.