

Fruit Tree Pruning 'Primer'

When it comes to pruning, fruit trees are not created equal. For all fruit trees, however, late winter is the time to start thinking about pruning in advance of the upcoming growing season. This can be done from now through March as long as wood isn't frozen.

While pruning is a necessity, limit removal to about 30 percent of the tree using the following 'order' of removal. For mature fruit trees, start by removing broken, damaged, or diseased branches. Follow those cuts by removing branches that are at a narrow angle since they are weak and tend to break during wind/ice storms. Suckers (the branches that grow straight up, either from the trunk or from major branches) need to be removed, as do branches that are crossing and rubbing against one another. Branches that are low to the ground and may be inhibiting pruning or harvest can be removed next, followed by branches that might help to reduce the overall size of the tree as necessary. Finally, thin branches on the interior of the tree.

Specific trees do have some special 'rules' all their own. Peach and nectarine trees bear fruit on growth from the previous year. Failure to prune will result in fruit that is set further and further from the tree's center, resulting in heavy fruit crops that can break branches. Failure to prune apples can result not only in them quickly becoming overgrown, but can even result in biennial bearing – a huge crop one year and none the next. Cherry, pear, and plum trees can generally benefit from simple removal of branches that are causing problems according to the rules above – with no further attention necessary. Young fruit trees should not be pruned in the year of planting except to cut back the tree to a height of 36 inches to encourage side branch development (if there are already side branches, do not prune.)

During the pruning process, keep a few rules of thumb in mind. First, the 30 percent removal guideline is to help the tree retain enough branches that it can support itself, while still encouraging pruning that encourages fruit production. There is certainly some 'flexibility' in it as long as you don't get carried away. Second, when removing branches, always make cuts back to another branch or a bud. Avoid leaving stubs. Third: treatment of the pruned area isn't necessary. Proper pruning cuts will allow the tree to heal naturally and quickly without help. Treatment of pruning tools is a different story since there are some diseases that can be spread from tree to tree by pruning equipment. To help offset these potential issues, disinfect equipment between trees using rubbing alcohol or some other disinfecting agent.

Need a little more ‘guidance’ when it comes to the pruning process? Maybe some pictures to help guide the process? Check out Pruning Fruit Trees, available in your District Office or online at:

<https://www.bookstore.ksre.ksu.edu/pubs/c631.pdf> .