

The Art of Pruning Fruit Trees



Pruning of fruit trees is often overlooked, until the tree is overgrown with weak branches. The practice of pruning fruit trees will create stronger branches that can withstand the weight of a heavy crop load. Pruning should be done in late winter or early spring to avoid winter injury.

Pruning Young Trees

The primary goal of pruning young fruit trees is to create spacing between branching which will increase light and air flow inside the tree canopy. Start with ensuring there is a central leader. If there is not one, create one by using a rubber tie and train the best small branch at the top of the tree to an upright position (this may take many weeks adjusting as you go). Next, creating space between branches is your primary objective. Choose 4-5 main scaffolds as your main branches that will be maintained throughout the life of the tree. Among those main scaffolds prune out branches that are not spaced properly by performing thinning cuts. As a rule, never remove more than 30% off the total leaf area, in a particular year.

Pruning Trees over 5 years of Age

Most training of trees is done in the first 5 years to create the structure of the tree. After that point maintaining an open canopy and maintenance is needed. When pruning at this point, first take any broken or dead branches out. Next, remove any water sprouts (those growing straight up) and any branches that are crossing and rubbing. Reduce any limbs that are hindering light penetration in the upper part of the canopy; by performing these thinning cuts, you should also be able to reduce some of the size of your tree. You should never prune branches just to be pruning, there should be a reason to cut each branch. With proper pruning techniques, you should not be removing branches more than a couple inches in diameter. Refrain from using pruning sealer. Oxygen is the best healer of pruning wounds.



How To Make Pruning Cuts

1. Disinfect your cutting tool between cuts, especially if you suspect disease.
2. Always use a sharp bypass pruner, or saw that will make a clean cut. Clean up any jagged pieces left behind as this can cause rotting and disease.
3. Always make cuts on the outer edge of the branch collar.
4. If needed cut on the bottom side of the branch 2-3 inches past the collar about 1/3 up the branch and then make the cut in the appropriate place on the top of the branch to ensure the branch does not rip the collar.
5. When reducing the length of a branch, make a thinning cut back to where the branch joins with a side shoot.
6. Avoid heading cuts which is a cut on the terminal part of the shoot-this will encourage excessive growth.
7. Make cuts at an angle away from the bud, and in the direction the bud is pointing. This will help eliminate rot.