Prune for production

LITITZ — Most people tend to do too little pruning because they are afraid of hurting production. To the contrary, pruning is necessary to produce a high yield of good quality fruit.

Pruning should be done at least once a year and most pruning is done while the trees are dormant in late winter or early spring. It should always be done with sharp tools to guarantee a clean cut and reduce the chance of injuring the remaining wood.

Pruning has three specific purposes. The first is to train the tree to a desired shape and size. Secondly, pruning helps maintain and grow healthy trees. Finally, pruning will improve fruit quality and yield when done properly.

Your job in the tree's first year of life is to select a permanent framework for production. With a little luck, three to five limbs will develop that are about the same size and evenly spaced around the tree. The main idea is to try and develop a "Christmas tree" shape.

What happens to the tree in the first year if you don't get any branches or only one branch? The only thing to do is cut off the one or two branches that occur and wait until next year to select branches. Trying to save those one or two branches will discourage branching later and make it harder to develop a well-shaped tree.

Of the three to five branches, the highest limb on the trunk, generally upright, is kept for a central leader or main trunk. If it is two feet or longer you should head it back slightly to encourage branching in the next spring. However, it should be six to ten inches taller than the side branches.

It is important that the side branches have wide angles. If wide angles do not develop naturally, you can make limb spreaders. Use wood strips or a stiff wire with sharpened ends. Limb spreaders are used to force branches away from the trunk and develop a wide angle.

The angle should be between 60 and 90 degrees for a strong union between limb and trunk. Narrow angled branches will split under heavy fruit loads. Limb spreading can be done in the first or second year and should be maintained until the angle has developed properly.

In the second year of growth, try to develop a second tier of branches on the central leader. Cut back these branches so they are no longer than the tree top. These second tier branches should also have wide crotches so they will not crack under the strain of fruit production.

When the tree reaches the desired height, cut back the central leader, developing it into a weak side branch. This will discourage the tree from growing too tall.

When you head back a branch you encourage branching below it; this is how to develop secondary branches for fruit to develop on. If you cut back a branch to a strong point, the branch will become head it back slightly to encourage longer. If you cut it to a weak point, it doesn't grow quite as long.

This is how to control the length that a tree spreads and also the height. Remember trees must be pruned properly in the beginning to develop a good fruit production framework for the next twenty to thirty years.

Use native plants for effect

LITITZ — Ecology-minded Americans are showing an increased interest in incorporating native plants into their home landscaping. While native plants have the advantage of being well-adapted to our climate and weather conditions, it is important to consider the local soil and exposure conditions in which they grow best.

The American holly, for example, does not normally grow in open fields, nor does the swamp magnolia inhabit dry, parched soils.

Many of our best native plants have been used in landscaping for years, including the flowering dogwood, American holly, and red swamp maple. However, many others are overlooked which could add interest and beauty to home gardens.

One such plant is clethra, or summer sweet. It normally grows in wet, shaded thickets along the edges of wooded areas, but will also grow in normal soil and full sun. Summer sweet blooms in midsummer with erect clusters of fragrant white flowers.

Another excellent native plant is bayberry. No other shrub will tolerate more varied soils and exposures.

The fringe tree forms a small tree or large, multi-stemmed shrub that, in full bloom, is as attractive as a flowering dogwood, although quite different. It grows to a height of about 15 feet, a size well suited to home landscapes.

Another choice is the red choke cherry, one of the best shrubs for fall fruit. In the wild it is often found in wet thickets, but will do well in any ordinary soil.

Although native plants can sometimes be dug up and transplanted from the wild, horticulturists recommend buying them from a nursery. They will be easier to transplant and establish, and this will also protect wild plants.

Irrigation meeting on Tuesday

TERRE HILL — The Eastern Lancaster County Adult Farmer Program will conduct an Irrigation Meeting on Tuesday at 7:30 p.m., at the Union Grove School.

Henry Wooding, Penn State Extension Engineer, will be the speaker. Topics will include types of systems including sprinkle and trickle, planning an irrigation system, water management, cropping systems, irrigation economics and management of an irrigation system.

The 1980 drought reduced yields and quality of field, vegetable, and fruit crops in Lancaster County. As a result, many growers are able to see the value of irrigation. Being able to apply water at just the right time can increase yields of almost all crops during any growing season and provides insurance during drought years.

There are many irrigation systems that can be adapted very well to Lancaster County agriculture. Wooding has years of experience with irrigation systems and will discuss how they can best be used to increase yields on area farms.

All interested persons are invited. The Union Grove School is located near Terre Hill on Route 625, 2 miles north of route 23. For additional information, call Donald Robinson or Ro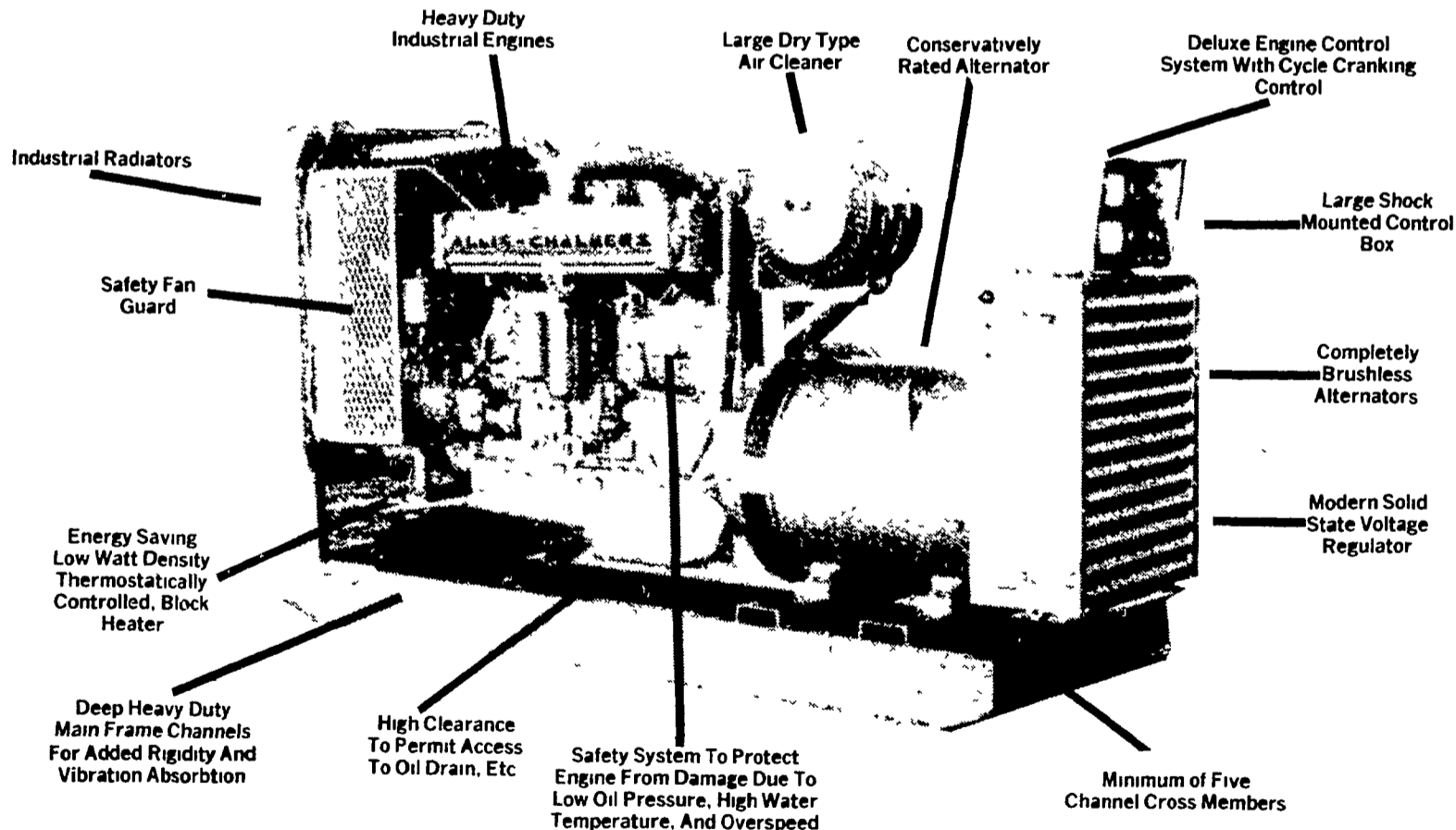bert Anderson, adult farmer instructors, at 445-5041.