

Properly pruned fruit trees develop a strong, well-balanced framework that produces more fruit.

Great and small gardeners should begin pruning their fruit trees in March. Four important pruning steps will make your job easier.

First, examine the tree closely and prune off any dead branches. Ask yourself why did the branch die? This will help you develop corrective control measures during the coming growing season.

Secondly, locate and remove any broken branches. Broken branches may not be dead but any fruit they bear will cause further damage to the tree.

Thirdly, remove one- and two-year-old shoots and suckers growing up in the center of the tree. Also remove branches growing back through the tree.

Finish up by thinning out the remaining branches. Each branch should receive sunlight and air.

Try to visualize what the tree will look like with a full load of leaves and fruit. The limbs will of course be bent downward. For this reason, no limb should be permitted to grow directly over another. Pruning one such limb will avoid limb rub and damage to the fruit skin from rubbing.

Prune your oldest apple trees first and move to progressively to younger trees. For very vigorous varieties, wait until after new growth starts to prune. Prune older trees more vigorously.

Young apple trees usually receive pruning later in March and April closest to bud break. Avoid overpruning — especially young trees which have not yet begun to

bear. Maintain a central leader on apple trees by spreading down or thinning out those side branches that are competing with the leader. Branches that form too narrow an angle with the trunk should be removed.

Only a handful of branches should remain on a young tree. Avoid — excessive thinning out on young trees. Excessive thinning promotes additional shoot growth without any increase in flower and fruit buds.


Two types of cuts are made on fruit trees. Thinning-out cuts remove entire limbs or shoots. This type of pruning cut increases the number of flower buds produced. Heading back cuts shorten the ends of branches and encourages more shoot growth.

Avoid pruning just before expected large swings in temperature. A 30 to 40 degree change in temperature predisposes a tree to winter/frost injury.

Lastly, remove pruned branches and limbs from the orchard. Dead wood harbors disease organisms that can spread back into the tree.

Any questions regarding the above article can be addressed to Tom Becker, Penn State Cooperative Extension at (717) 840-7408.

All Gardens Great & Small
by
York Co.
Horticultural Agent
Tom Becker



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