

Peach Trees

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Q:

I have three peach trees that resemble something out of a Dr. Seuss adventure.

They have long bare branches with poms-poms out at the ends and many of the branches broke off this summer when they were carrying fruit. I also have a nectarine tree that had only one fruit on the whole tree. Can you please tell me how I can get my trees to look better and produce more fruit without breaking off limbs?

A:

What you describe on both the peach and nectarine trees are signs of poor pruning techniques. All fruit trees benefit from both summer and winter pruning.

Peaches, nectarines, plums and apricots are all members of the *Prunus* genus and are therefore closely related. They commonly are referred to as "stone fruits" because the seed is very large and hard. Buds for next year's crop are starting to form on your trees now. Buds usually start to form after harvest in late July to mid-August. It is important to provide regular water and to fertilize your trees monthly during the spring and summer growing season to encourage new growth as peach and nectarine trees fruit on new wood. I usually stop fertilizing in late August to allow new growth to harden off before frosts hit in November. Light summer pruning involves thinning branches to allow some sunlight to reach the limbs to help form fruiting buds and to control the size of the tree. Timing is everything, though. Don't prune too soon while new growth is forming as this new growth provides nutrients for the tree and protects it from sun burning.

Winter pruning may involve extreme pruning, such as removing branches, cutting the size of the tree back to a manageable height, or simply shaping the tree to encourage and manage growth. For Peach and Nectarine trees you should remove 50% of last year's growth. Fig, Apple, Pear, Plum and Apricot remove about 20% of last year's growth. Apricot trees should only be pruned in summer before onset of winter rains to prevent *Eutypa* fungus infection of pruning wounds. To find out more about the care of peach trees and other stone fruits you can visit the UC Home Orchard site: [http://homeorchard.ucanr.edu/Fruits & Nuts/Peach/](http://homeorchard.ucanr.edu/Fruits_&_Nuts/Peach/)

Dormant spraying is another important practice to keeping your peach and nectarine trees healthy. They need to be sprayed with a copper based dormant spray to discourage diseases at least twice during the dormant season between November and late January. Try to spray when there will be no rain for several days afterwards. In addition all dead leaves and old fruit should be cleaned up and disposed of away from the orchard as soon as the leaves fall. One targeted disease is Peach leaf curl, which was a big problem this past spring due to the extremely wet year. Peach leaf curl does not kill the tree, but it looks awful; the leaves curl and fall off. New leaves will grow, but energy that would normally go into producing fruit is used to produce more leaves. This could affect photosynthesis and other processes that keep the tree healthy. You can

read more about Peach leaf curl and other diseases and pests that affect stone fruit at the UC IPM site: <http://ipm.ucanr.edu/PMG/GARDEN/fruit.htm>

To keep branches from breaking when covered in fruit, thin the fruit in late spring. This will help to prevent overloading the branch and will provide you with larger and sweeter fruit.