

Pruning Overgrown Fruit Trees

by Jim Gormely

Several years ago I moved to a new property, which had a large variety of mature fruit trees in various stages of life. Some were in bad shape; others were 30 feet tall and had not been pruned for years. I decided to simply replace the bad trees with new improved varieties that were disease resistant and semi-dwarf. (If you are planting a new fruit tree—this is bareroot planting season—you may want to consider a dwarf tree to avoid climbing ladders to pick fruit and do pruning.) However, if you choose to prune an existing overgrown fruit tree in your yard, here are three methods from which to choose:

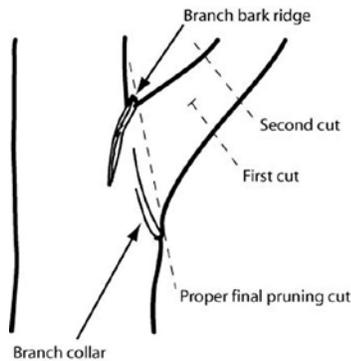
Method one: Make mostly thinning cuts. This method assumes that the tree is structurally sound and not much taller than can be easily managed with an available ladder. If the tree has been neglected, many branches will need to be removed, especially high in the tree.

Begin by removing any dead, diseased, broken or damaged limbs. Branches that cross or rub against each other should be pruned out, as should redundant limbs and branches that grow toward the interior of the tree.

The objective is to let sunlight penetrate to the lower fruiting branches. This can be further accomplished by thinning the remaining canopy. Remove any branches growing beyond the height that you can reach to pick fruit. The tree will produce new vigorous shoots, especially near the top of the tree. The best time to remove these shoots is during summer pruning. Prune the tree to the same height annually.



Heavy pruning on Peach trees.



Tree pruning – proper pruning cut.

Method two: If the tree is structurally sound but taller than you can manage safely, reduce the tree height slowly over a three-year period. Once you determine how tall you desire the tree to be, cut one third of the excess each year. Major cuts should be made during April to reduce the chances of disease and infection at the pruning wounds. Rainfall may be less during this period and active growth hastens the healing process.

Avoid major cuts in summer which could attract borers. Exposed major branches can sunburn. Prevent sunburn by painting exposed branches/trunk with a 50/50 mixture of white latex paint and water.

Because large cuts stimulate new growth, remove or head back “waterspouts” once or twice during the summer to avoid shading lower fruit wood. Continue to thin additional branches as needed to allow some sunlight to penetrate into the canopy.

Method three: Drastically cut back all main branches but one. This is an extreme method of reducing tree height in a single season. Not all trees are capable of re-sprouting from lower branches. Apples and pears will usually do so, as will citrus and avocados. However, old stone fruit trees such as peaches, cherries, apricots and nectarines may not re-sprout effectively because lower buds may not be able to grow



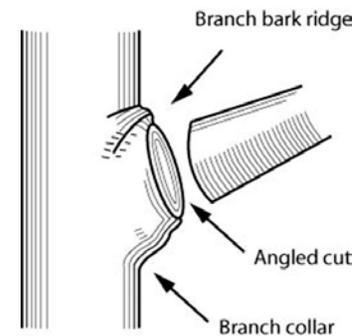
Tree pruning – branch removal.

through the thick bark. If the tree has no main branches below 6 to 8 feet from the ground, it is better to use methods 1 or 2 above or remove the tree completely. This is because a major cut low in the tree would leave a stump which may not regrow.

If you still want to try this extreme method, cut back main branches to a height that will result in a tree of the desired size. Branches may be cut to a length of 4 feet. Preserve and cut back lateral branches where possible, even if the laterals are small. These laterals, along with shoots arising from buds on the main branches will form the framework for a new, smaller tree. However, a large root system remains and needs to be maintained by photosynthesis. This photosynthesis process, which provides food to the roots, can be accomplished by leaving one smaller main branch or a large side branch (nurse branch). Remove or cut back the nurse branch the following year.

For a better understanding of this subject, mark your calendar for February 2, 2013 to attend a fruit tree pruning demonstration on open garden day at the Tuolumne County Master Gardener demonstration garden, located behind Cassina High, 251 So. Barretta Street, Sonora. Hours are from 10:00 am – 1:00 pm.

This article is adapted from University of California ANR publication 8058 "Fruit trees: Pruning overgrown deciduous trees". Jim Gormely is a Tuolumne county Master Gardener.



Tree pruning – limb pruning cut.