



## Last Call for Pruning Deciduous Fruit Trees

by Carolyn Carpino, Retired Master Gardener

If you want trees with plenty of vigor and juicy fruit next summer, then it's time to prune your fruit trees. Deciduous fruit trees are pruned when dormant to strengthen the branching structure and promote fruit production. Fruit trees will respond to pruning better when dormant than any other time of the year. Most gardeners like to prune and spray as close to the same time as possible. Get busy because if pruned too late, after the middle of February, insect populations are more active and may invade the tree through the open pruning cuts. Borers, the worst enemies of fruit trees, often enter this way.

Pruning techniques are different for every fruit tree, and can get pretty complicated. Start with the easy stuff. Prune out broken and crossing branches, suckers and water sprouts (vigorous interior upright shoots) and any over-long limbs. Looks better already, doesn't it? Now look for signs of disease like scorched, withered areas, or black, sunken cankers. Cut these off at least 6 inches into healthy tissue. If you see blackened areas inside, cut back farther.

When making thinning cuts (removing entire branches), remember to cut just outside the branch bark collar, the ridge of material that fosters natural healing. Don't cut flush, don't leave a stub, and don't use any pruning sealer.

When making heading cuts (cutting back long branches), cut to a healthy outward facing bud for best shape. Large heading cuts should be cut to a lateral that is close to 1/3 the size of the large limb. This lateral should be facing outward.

The first four years are critical in training a fruit tree. If you're starting with a first year whip (tree without branches), it's hard to believe you'll eventually get baskets of fruit from that little stick. Start training by cutting off the whip where you want the crown of the tree to form. That's usually 20-28 inches from the ground, unless you want to be able to walk under it.

The following winter, cut off all branches but three primary scaffolds. These should be equally spaced around the tree and about 6 inches apart. The following year, select six secondary scaffolds, two from each of the main scaffolds, to fill in the tree. You've just established your basic framework.



This 2-year-old branch is being shortened back to a 1-year-old fruiting branch.

As your tree matures, it should be pruned to encourage fruit. Fruit is formed either on spurs, which resemble short stubby twigs, or on new growth. Depending upon where the fruit is formed, the tree is pruned either to encourage spurs or force new growth.

Apple, pear and cherry trees produce on spurs, which are formed on older branches. Their branches naturally tend to grow upright. When your tree is young train the scaffold branches to a 60-degree angle from the trunk. Use weights, wires, or props to force branches flat while young and flexible. After the branch reaches the desired length, tip it back to force growth energy into the development of spurs.

Peach and nectarine trees are pruned heavily each winter because their fruit is produced on one-year-old wood. Mature trees may be pruned by removing about two-thirds of the new growth. This can be done by removing two out of three shoots formed in the previous year. These trees are pruned outward each year to control the height and open up the centers.

Plum trees bear fruit on spurs. European plums, such as those used for drying, need minimal pruning, like apples. But Japanese plums, like Santa Rosa, grow so vigorously they need heavy pruning of new growth. Shorten excessive vertical growth by half, making the cut just above an outward facing bud. The growth that remains will form fruit spurs during the summer and will bear fruit the year after that.

Apricot trees are often pruned after harvest and before September to prevent canker infections spread by wet weather and fresh pruning wounds. Apricot trees bear fruit on both one-year-old wood and on spurs that bear annually for about four years. One method of pruning is to cut back some of the older branches to force new growth each spring. The idea is to prune enough to produce new fruiting spurs and to prune away old spurs that have lost their vigor.

After you finish pruning, clean up all fallen leaves, mummified fruit, and the pruning debris. Finish up with a thorough dormant spraying and start dreaming of the bountiful harvest you'll have this summer.



Dormant buds on a fruit spur. In spring buds will swell, green tips will show followed by flower petals.

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