

Pruning Tips

A little knowledge and a pair of pruners can cause a lot of damage to a tree. If you are new to pruning learn how to do it right. Just don't cut anywhere, identify the branch collar and make the cut ¼" above the collar never, never cut the branch flush with the trunk or another limb. Visit the UCANR website for pruning guidelines. Consult an arborist if you are thinking of doing a major pruning job.

The best time to prune a fruit tree is when they are dormant. If you have inherited the tree from a previous owner or caretaker. Identify what problems exist. Ask yourself these questions: Is the fruit too small, is it hard to pick the fruit, are the limbs crossing, is the fruit too high to pick? Your answers will dictate a pruning strategy.

If you are working on an existing never been pruned or improperly pruned tree you have to be judicious in what and how much you cut. A good rule of thumb is to never remove more than 30% of the limbs. Take a good look at the tree ahead of time and determine your largest cut first, the one that will give you the most benefit. Dead or dying branches do not count towards the 30% threshold. Diseased limbs should be handled carefully. A good practice is to sterilize your tools after every cut with 10% bleach and discard the diseased limbs into the gray bins. These are the 3 Ds (dead, diseased, or dying) of pruning.

Limbs that are crossing, crowding or competing with other limbs should be considered next. Crossing limbs should be obvious, they are actually rubbing up against another limb. Limbs that are rubbing up against a fence or other solid object also should be removed. A break in the bark is a possible entryway for bugs or other pathogens to enter. Competing limbs are next. Are the limbs basically growing in the same direction and are they fairly close together, and will they compete for the same sunlight? Crowding is similar to crossing and competition, as the word suggests the fruit and leaves are crowded, they are not getting enough sunlight or room for air to circulate. These are the 3 Cs (crossing, competing and crowding) of pruning.

On grafted trees you might see growth below the graft or in the ground, this is the rootstock trying to express itself as its own tree. These can be removed anytime as they rootstock growth will divert energy away from the grafted tree.

Over pruning, may produce water sprouts. These occur because the tree attempts to recover from the shock of losing foliage by producing vigorous growth. Water sprouts are usually small diameter limbs growing together straight up. These limbs are also candidates for removal.

It is well worth your time to take a tree pruning class, consult an arborist, refer to the UCANR website, and use the right tools and techniques. Cecolusa.ucanr.edu