

## TEN BASICS OF WHEN AND HOW TO PRUNE FRUIT TREES

*by Paul Vossen*

1. Prune fruit trees when the leaves are off (dormant). It's easier to see what you are doing and removal of dormant buds (growing points) invigorates the remaining buds. Summer pruning removes leaves (food manufacturer), slows fruit ripening, and exposes fruit to sunburn. Summer pruning can be used, however, to slow down overly vigorous trees or trees that are too large. It is most effective in early summer.
2. Right after planting a new tree, cut it off to a short stick 24 to 30 inches high and cut any side shoots remaining below that to 1-2 buds. This encourages low branching and equalizes the top and root system. Paint the tree with white latex paint to protect it from sunburn and borer attack.
3. Low vigor, young trees should be pruned fairly heavily and encouraged to grow rapidly for the first 3 years without much fruit. Leave most of the small horizontal branches untouched for later fruiting. Vigorous growing, young trees can be pruned much less or not at all and encouraged to fruit earlier with branch bending.
4. Topping a vertical branch encourages vegetative growth necessary for development of the tree and creates a bushing effect. Topping horizontal branches is done to renew fruiting wood and to thin off excessive fruit. Thinning vertical branches opens the tree to more light. Thinning horizontal branches removes fruit. Horizontal branches left uncut will bear earlier and heavier crops.
5. Upright branches generally remain vegetative and vigorous. Horizontal branches generally are more fruitful. A good combination of the two is necessary for fruiting now and in future years. Branches bent to 45° to 60° angles achieves this balance.
6. Remove diseased or broken branches. Remove suckers, water sprouts and most competing branches growing straight up into the tree. Downward bending branches (beyond 90°) eventually lose vigor and produce only a few small fruit; cut off the part hanging down.
7. New growth occurs right where you make the cut; that is, the influence of the cut only affects the buds within 1 to 8 inches of the cut surface, not 3 to 4 feet down into the tree. The more buds cut off the more vigorous the new shoots will be.
8. Sun exposed wood remains fruitful and produces the largest fruit. Shaded branches eventually stop fruiting and will never produce again without drastic topping and renewal of the entire tree. Do most of the pruning in the top of the tree so that the lower branches are exposed to sunlight.
9. Make clean cuts (within ¼") of a bud; don't leave stubs.
10. Peach, nectarine, grape, & kiwi bear on last year's shoot growth and they grow a lot, so remove at least 50% of last years' growth. For fig, olive, walnut, chestnut, pecan, almond, cherry, feijoa, persimmon, apple, pear, plum, plumcot, and apricot which bear on spurs or less vigorous shoots, remove about 20% of last years' growth. For citrus, just keep the skirts pruned up off the ground.



## TEN FAQs OF PRUNING FRUIT TREES

by UC Master Gardeners of Napa County

1. **WHAT IS PRUNING?**
  - cutting twigs and branches, dead or living.
  - Something happens when we prune—gardeners need to know what that is!
2. **WHY DO WE PRUNE? THESE ARE OUR GOALS.**
  - establishes a sound structure
  - promotes good air circulation
  - balances shady leaves and sunny branches
  - assists fruit production
3. **WHEN IS THE RIGHT TIME TO PRUNE?**
  - when the tree is dormant
  - YES: January and February
  - MAYBE: November, December, March
4. **WHAT ABOUT SUMMER PRUNING?**
  - summer pruning manages tree size
  - dormant pruning manages fruit, and tree structure
5. **WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT TREE ANATOMY?**
  - scaffold branches, lateral branches, nodes, spurs, watersprouts
6. **WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT PRUNING VOCABULARY?**
  - leader, open center, topping, heading cut, thinning cut, dormant pruning, summer pruning
7. **DO I NEED SPECIAL TOOLS?**
  - YES! Hand pruner, lopper, pruning saw. Remember, clean sharpen, sanitize, lubricate
8. **ARE THERE SOME PRUNING GUIDELINES?**
  - allow plenty of time
  - assemble all tools
  - step back and look often
  - start at the back or bottom and get the feel
9. **AND THERE ARE SOME RULES, TOO.**
  - work from inside to outside
  - never leave a stub
  - when heading back, cut to out facing bud or branch
  - when thinning, cut just outside the branch collar
  - UC recommends NO paint or seal on the cut, no matter what size
10. **IT'S ALL ABOUT SUNLIGHT!**
  - sunlight makes fruit grow: on the leaves, it provides food for the tree, on the branches it provides food for the fruit
  - do most of the pruning in the top of the tree so the lower branches are exposed to sunlight; shaded branches eventually stop fruiting