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## How to prune apple, peach and apricot trees

By SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS  
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**Dr. Allan Bernstein prunes an apple tree in the yard of his Sebastopol home.  
Christopher Chung/The Press Democrat**

**Question:** In my backyard I have apple, peach and apricot trees. Should I prune these three species the same way or take a different approach for each?

**Answer:** Pruning is an important and necessary step in the care of all three tree species. It helps control the height of a tree, improve light penetration to the branches and encourage airflow within the tree canopy.

Controlling the tree's height allows easier access to harvest the fruit without the need for ladders. Improving light penetration and distribution to the branches within the canopy increases fruiting wood throughout the tree. Sunbathed wood is more fruitful. Improving airflow within the canopy reduces the risk of pathogen infection and damage.

The two pruning cuts employed for all fruit trees are “heading” cuts and “thinning” cuts.

Heading cuts are used to control the height of trees, because shorter trees are easier to harvest. The heading cut is made by removing a branch from the branch tip (also known as the apical or terminal node) to any point below, but not at its full length. It's also known as an “invigorating” cut, as it removes the apical/terminal node and the hormone that limits development of lateral branches. As a result, new lateral buds will develop, along with leaves and flower buds.

As the name suggests, thinning cuts reduce or thin the amount of vegetative growth on a tree, thus increasing air circulation, light penetration and ease of harvest. A thinning cut removes an entire branch back to where it's attached to the next branch. The cut is made just outside the branch collar at the base of the branch. The thinning cut is known as a “de-invigorating” cut because it reduces the tree's vigor or vegetative growth. The branch removed by a thinning cut will not regenerate. Both heading cuts and thinning cuts are important in the pruning of all three species.

For both apples and peaches, the first pruning of the year is generally done in winter (January/February) after all the leaves have dropped and you can see the structure of the tree. It's also known as dormant pruning. Apricots should not be pruned until after harvest, in late July or early August, due to their susceptibility during rainy season to a condition known as “Eutypa die-back disease.”

One dormant (winter) season pruning objective is to restore or maintain the original tree shape by removing dead, broken diseased or crossing branches, or branches and water sprouts with thinning cuts. Apple trees should have a central leader shape, like a Christmas tree, while peach and apricots should have an open center, like a wine glass. The tree is reduced to harvest height by a combination of thinning and heading cuts. In addition, the timing of these cuts coincides with the trees' transition out of winter dormancy and the invigoration of vegetative growth that will lead to leaves and flowers in the spring.

### **Pruning techniques**

All three species have unique fruiting characteristics that will make a difference in how you prune.

Apples are produced on spurs (or buds) that are found on wood that is two years and older. When pruning apple trees you must balance the need to achieve harvest height, sunlight penetration and airflow with the need to preserve apple spurs for fruit production. After thinning cuts have opened the canopy, heading cuts should be made on remaining branches above the fruit spurs that are farther down the branch.

Peach trees bear fruit almost entirely on one-year-old branch growth (last year's growth). The open center shaping allows for maximum light penetration and fruit wood development. Your peach tree must be pruned more heavily (up to 50% of the prior

year's growth) than most fruit trees to properly manage the amount of fruit-bearing wood each year. Effective pruning will also reduce the amount of hand thinning of fruit required later in the season.



**Pruning is important for the health and fruit-bearing potential of many fruit trees.**

Apricot trees fruit laterally on spurs that are typically only productive for three years. Since the apricot spur system is short-lived, the pruning should allow for frequent new spur development. Apricots should only be pruned in summer months, after harvest and in the absence of moisture to prevent disease. They can be shaped in an open center style by using both thinning cuts to remove crowded, damaged branches and heading cuts to achieve and retain harvest height.

Best of success with your pruning efforts. A well-pruned tree is a great first step in developing a healthy and fruitful backyard treasure.

*Contributors to this week's column were Tim Coyne, Diane Judd and Joy Lanzendorfer. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County [sonomamg.ucanr.edu/](http://sonomamg.ucanr.edu/) provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions [toscmgpd@gmail.com](mailto:toscmgpd@gmail.com). You will receive answers to your questions either in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at 707-565-2608 or [ormgsonoma@ucanr.edu](mailto:ormgsonoma@ucanr.edu).*