

**UC MASTER GARDENER PROGRAM
OF SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY**



The UC Master Gardener Program is a public service and outreach program under the University of California Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources (UC ANR), administered locally by participating UC Cooperative Extension offices (UCCE). Our mission is to extend research based knowledge and information on home horticulture, pest management, and sustainable landscape practices to the residents of California.

FRUIT TREES: Fruit Bush Pruning

Charles Davis, Master Gardener

The correct pruning of deciduous fruit trees is an essential part of their overall care and maintenance. As with the more traditional forms of Open Center and Modified Central Leader pruning described elsewhere on this website, fruit bush pruning's goals are to provide the tree with a strong network of scaffold branches to support a healthy crop load, to allow an adequate exposure to sunshine and air movement to help fight disease and to aid in fruiting and pollination, to remove dead, diseased or crowded branches for the overall health of the tree, and to maintain a desired height and width of canopy size to more easily spray for disease control, and to thin and pick fruit without the use of ladders.

Although it can be done with trees planted singly, more commonly fruit bush pruning is used when multiple trees are planted in a single hole. Home gardeners typically plant this way when space is at a premium, when they are planting trees that need a companion to provide cross-pollination, or when they wish to prolong a harvest by planting a variety of trees which bear early, mid-season, and late in the year. These multiple plantings can be of different types of deciduous fruit trees or various cultivars of the same type of tree.

If multiple trees are planted together, a further goal of fruit bush pruning is to ensure that no single tree outgrows or dominates any of the other trees. Pruning is done so each tree is maintained at the same size as its companions---and quite often multiple pruning is needed throughout the year (not just at winter time) to accomplish this. The goal is that from a distance the trees appear to have a common canopy, but are multi-trunked.

Our Master Gardener Demonstration Garden has a number of multiple-planted trees to serve as a guide to you. Look particularly at the Kieffer and Hood pear trees and the Minnie Royal and Royal Lee cherry trees (which cross pollinate their companion tree), as well as the Mid-Pride, Eva's Pride and Snow Queen peaches that ripen at different times during the year. Each tree retains its own size and space, and while the centers may be more densely grown than other traditionally pruned trees, they are open enough to allow light and air movement.

The University of California publication, The Home Orchard, offers the following specific advice for fruit bush pruning, "Pruning...involves cutting off any shoots above the tree's permanent height two to three times per year. Also, periodically thin out crowding branches, especially at the top of the tree, and remove nonproductive fruiting wood in the early spring when you can see which branches have no flowers. After the third year, you may find it necessary to open up the center of the tree...It is easier to use with dwarfing rootstocks since they grow somewhat less vigorously... rapid, dense growth can be especially challenging with plums and apricots."

While any type of fruit tree can be grown and pruned in a collective planting, care should be taken in using apricot trees. Unlike other deciduous fruit trees apricots should never be pruned in the winter, when open pruning cuts and rainfall combine to leave the tree susceptible to a fungal disease called eutypa lata, which often is fatal. If apricots are planted, then, in combination with other trees, their height would not be able to be regulated during normal winter pruning. If this type of pruning is desired for apricots they should be planted singly or only with other apricots or apriums, which then can be pruned together in non-winter months.

References:

Ingels, Chuck A, Pamela M Geisel, and Norton V Maxwell. 2007. The Home Orchard. Oakland, Calif.: University of California, Agriculture and Natural Resources

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GARDENING QUESTIONS? ASK THE MASTER GARDENERS AT HELPLINE: 805-781-5939



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