QUESTION: I pruned my fruit trees early this spring, before they leafed out. Why do I need to prune them again in the summer?

Answer: When you prune fruit trees, it impacts shoot growth and fruit development, whether in the summer when the tree is covered with leaves or in the winter when the tree is dormant. Both forms of pruning reduce the tree’s total fruit-bearing capacity, but they have distinctly different effects on future tree development.

During winter months, the tree is storing carbohydrates in its roots and the structure of the tree is in plain sight. Removing branches in winter does not impede the tree’s ability to feed itself. As a result, when it begins to grow in the spring, it has more stored food to allocate to growing points.

You can keep your tree smaller by pruning any time between mid- to late spring and summer. Apricots are an exception and should be pruned in late summer to prevent fungal infection. By removing or shortening branches and shoots, you can make the fruit easier to reach. But simultaneously, you are removing the leaves it uses for photosynthesis, reducing its vigor and capacity for new growth. Summer pruning also reduces the amount of dormant pruning required the following winter.

The best cuts to use for summer pruning are thinning cuts, the ones that remove entire lateral branches back to the connection point. Occasionally, you might use heading cuts to shorten branches or shoots. Remember, a good tree height lets you reach for thinning, picking and spraying, if needed, while you’re standing on the ground.

Begin summer pruning by removing dead branches and the least desirable of any crossing or rubbing branches. The remaining branches should contribute to the general good form of the tree. Prevent sunburn by leaving enough foliage to shade the limbs, and remember to remove all sucker growth from the base of the tree.

You improve air circulation and bring sunlight to the lower branches of the tree by using thinning cuts to remove lateral branches at regular intervals back to their origin. Do not cut into the collar at the attachment point and do not leave a stub. Do not apply any type of sealer to pruning cuts. Sealers can trap moisture and lead to disease. Instead, leave the cuts open to the air so they can dry out and callous naturally.
Pruning is best done with the right tools. A quality pair of pruning shears and another pair of lopping shears are two of the best investments a gardener can make. The right tools save you time and labor and make the difference between a quality job and a mediocre one. The sharper your tools, the faster and easier they cut. That means less exertion for you and less damage to the tree.

To minimize the risk of spreading disease, always disinfect pruning equipment before you start pruning and before moving to the next tree. Hydrogen peroxide or Lysol are commonly used as disinfectants.

Paint any exposed limbs with whitewash or a 50-50 mixture of white latex paint and water to prevent sunburn.

You now have a tree that is better prepared for not only the current growing season but also for the next dormant pruning the following winter.

Useful Links:
Fruit Trees; Training and Pruning Deciduous rees: bit.ly/3AiUKhv
When and How to Prune Fruit Trees: bit.ly/3i8XCXk
Pruning Cuts: bit.ly/3fXhl9Q

Question: I tried planting radish seeds with my 6-year-old this spring, and we just got big clumps of little plants so thick we couldn’t even thin them. Is there a better way to plant seeds with kids?

Answer: One great way is to make a seed tape. With a seed tape, no seed is wasted, spacing is just right and no thinning is required after seeds sprout. Choose fast-sprouting seeds like radish, lettuce, squash, marigolds and sunflowers so children see results quickly.

There are a number of ways to make seed tapes. (Find more information at bit.ly/3pSxthj and bit.ly/3gnIzHY.)

Let your child help you with each of these steps:
1. Measure the length of the space you want to plant.
2. Tear off a strip of toilet paper the same length as your planting space. Place it on a clean work surface your child can reach.
3. Place some seeds in a saucer.
4. Use a ruler and marker pen to make a row of dots along the toilet paper strip based on the spacing requirements on the back of the seed packet.
5. Dip a toothpick into a paste made of 2 tablespoons of water and 2 tablespoons of flour. Touch the tip of the toothpick into the paste, then pick up one of the seeds from the saucer. Use your finger or a toothpick to paste the seed onto the dot. Repeat the process down the length of the strip.
6. Let the strip dry, then carefully roll it up and put it aside until you’re ready to plant.
7. Check the back of your seed packet to see how deep to plant the seeds. Let your child use a little trowel to dig a trench to the required depth. Unroll the seed tape and lay it in the trench and cover the tape with soil.
8. Gently water the soil covering the tape. Keep it moist as the seeds sprout and become plants.

Here are some concepts and vocabulary to use to introduce children to growing seeds:
- Germination: when a seed turns into a seedling
- Seedling: a baby plant
- Seed coat: the hard outside surface of a seed that breaks open so the seedling can emerge
- Bud: the first sign that a leaf or flower is on the way

Good luck, happy gardening and most important — have fun!

Contributors to this week’s column were Tim Coyne, Linda Bishop, Pat Decker, Sue Lovelace, Ellie Samuel and Susan White. Send your gardening questions to scmgpd@gmail.com. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County (sonomamng.ucanr.edu) provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. The Master Gardeners will answer in the newspaper only questions selected for this column. Other questions may be directed to their Information Desk: 707-5652608 or mgsonoma@ucanr.edu.