Flower World

"A world of flowers, plants and a whole lot more."

Fruit Tree Pruning - 2025

In the Pacific Northwest, major tree pruning, like thinning and decluttering, is typically done in the winter (mid-December to mid-April), while the tree is dormant. This allows trees to heal quickly and reduces stress and the risk of disease. If spot pruning is needed, to remove dead wood or reduce the spread of fungal diseases, this can be done during the summer months but should be kept to a minimum. These guidelines are not intended for apricots, peaches and nectarines. **See Special Notes at the bottom*.

Winter Pruning vs. Summer Pruning

Winter pruning is done for structure and to encourage re-growth. Its primary goal is to form and maintain the structure of the tree. Apples and pears are pruned each winter and again each summer to maintain size control. Summer pruning often stops or limits growth but will provide earlier fruit production, usually after one season instead of 2-3 years. Summer pruning, sometime between the end of August until the end of September, when the branches have stopped growing and they have a terminal bud on the end. This is the time where you can limit the height of the tree and train laterals. Try to prune all stone fruit only in the summer to avoid diseases as they are more vulnerable than apples and pears.

Tools

Always clean and sanitize your tools between trees to prevent spreading of potential diseases or pests from tree to tree. Sanitize your blades between every cut if disease is suspected. Isopropyl alcohol (70%) works well, apply, and wait 30 seconds. Try to avoid bleach as it can pit the blades of your tools over time, and your tools need to soak in it for 30 minutes. Hydrogen peroxide (3%) is another option but takes 5-10 minutes.

For Newly Planted and Young Trees

Unless you are training your tree to a specific form like an espaliered tree, there are 2 main styles (shapes) for fruit trees. The open center or vase shape. This is primarily used for all stone fruit and can be used for apples and pears if desired. This tree will not have a central leader. The other shape is the Modified pyramidal (which is like a Christmas tree form). Smaller at the top and wider at the bottom with a central leader.

Train scaffold branches to 45-60 degrees from vertical. Use spacers as needed. Training is important because if your scaffold branches are too vertical, they will make just foliage (leaves, not fruit), and if they are too horizontal, they can just make water sprouts. Cut back branches by 1/3 to an outward facing bud, for stronger branches that can support fruit. Prune laterals short to the scaffold branches for better ability to bear fruit loads. Usually to 3-4 buds.

For all Established Trees

Start by pruning off the 3 D's - anything dead, diseased or damaged. Prune off any growth that is growing straight down, straight up, and any branches growing into the center of the tree. Leave the branch collar for proper healing. Prune off suckers and water sprouts. Prune to allow sunlight to reach the center of the tree for proper ripening. Do not have one branch over another within 2-3 feet to allow for good sunlight access.

As trees age, prune out big scaffold branches more than 50% of the diameter of the trunk leaving a stub of a few inches to encourage the renewal of the scaffold if desired. Do not take off more than 30% of the wood of the tree in one year. Doing so can make the tree try to grow and put out an excessive amount of growth trying to recover lost branches and foliage. This is not the desired result.

Use the three-part pruning method to avoid damage to the tree while pruning.

Three Types of Pruning Cuts

Heading Cuts

A heading cut is any cut made into 1 year old wood for any of three reasons:
1. Regrowth – the further back you cut, the stronger the growth response.
2. Thickening and strengthening branches – helps to bear the weight better of the fruit which helps the branch become self-supporting.
3. Inducing the formation of fruit buds on stem and short secondary shoots or laterals where fruit is borne. This can help your tree produce fruit earlier than if left unpruned.

The main questions that you need to ask yourself are: Do I want this branch to grow? If yes, head it back. If you want more growth prune back harder, little growth prune back less. Cut to a bud in the direction that you desire it to grow. An outer facing bud. Prune about ¼ inch above the bud as a buffer to potential dieback.

Thinning Cuts
This removes the entire limb/shoot at its point of origin and will not induce vegetative growth.

Shortening Cuts
Cutting back to second year or older wood. These cuts stop growth for the life of the tree. Be sure you want it gone. Fruit is best on weak to moderate laterals.

Spur-bearing vs. Tip-bearing pruning

Spur-bearing
The majority of apple varieties falls into this category. Spur bearing apple trees can be pruned harder and more often because they bear more fruit throughout the plant. Spur-bearing trees have more fruit buds per length of branch than do tip-bearing trees; they also tend to be shorter trees, have shorter branches and are slower growing. In spur-bearing trees, fruit is produced on short, knobby shoots called spurs that develop off the main branches. Over time spurs develop into spur systems. Spur-bearers have a compact tidy appearance and fruit is distributed fairly evenly along the branch.

Tip-bearing (and partial tip-bearing)
As the name suggest, fruit buds form on the tips of shoots. When these shoots extend to produce the next year's vegetative growth, the buds at the tip of the previous year's growth develop into fruit buds. The buds at the base of the new season's growth remain dormant or form leaves. It is important when pruning tip bearers not to prune off next season's crop. The previous year's young shoots – maiden shoots – should be left to bear fruit the following year. However, shoots longer than 9 inches or so can be pruned back to a growth bud to stimulate the production of more short tip-bearing shoots that will produce fruit in two years' time.

Definitions

Branch Collar
This is a swollen area of tissue that connects a branch to a main branch or to the trunk of the tree and is usually visible as a ridge or wrinkled bark.

Suckers
Shoots that grow from the base of the tree at or below ground level. They generally come from below the graft (the rootstock) and can quickly outgrow and overtake the variety that was grafted. Cut these off immediately. Some rootstocks sucker more than others so this can sometimes be an annual chore.

Water Sprouts
Shoots that generally grow straight up the branches very fast. They are just vegetative growth, meaning just leaves and don't bear fruit. They generally grow on branches that are mostly horizontal. As these don't bear fruit and just make your tree taller and taller over time (vigorous in nature), these should be removed. Remember, overtime, every water sprout you remove more will return.

Scaffold Branches
The main structural limbs of the tree and support all the other branches.

Lateral Branches
Branches that grow from the scaffold branches and are the primary fruit bearing branches of the tree.

Fruiting Spurs
Where the flowers and consequently fruit will grow. Fruiting spurs can be active for 8-10 years and in some cases up to 20 years.

Vegetative Bud
Vegetative buds will be on first year wood only. The branches are thinner and have more color. They will form leaves and shoots only, they are pointed, slender and clasped tight to the stem.

Fruiting Bud
Fruiting buds are found on second year and older wood. Branches are thicker and grayer/brown than first year wood. Fruiting buds are plump, fat, round and protrude from the stem.

*Special Notes

Apricots, Peaches, and Nectarines only flower and bear fruit on 1-year-old wood. Prune up to 50% off the tree to encourage new growth each year.