

## **Fruit Tree Training Systems**

Buying dwarf or semi-dwarf fruit trees is the most practical for the home gardener. Smaller trees are easier to prune and train to pyramid shapes. Trees trained this way receive much more light than round-headed trees and are more productive. The first three years of training are very important for tree development.

Early spring planting (March or April) is essential for good tree growth. Trees should be undamaged, not moldy, straight, and about four to six feet tall. Smaller trees are often stunted and never do well. Obtain trees certified to be true to their name and free of known viruses and other diseases. Larger trees that are branched are more expensive but may produce one to two years earlier.

The following principles apply to the central leader system and can be used on apples, pears, and plums. Peach and cherry trees are best trained to open-vase forms. The vertical axis system is similar to the central leader system except that pyramid-shaped trees are dwarf, are kept smaller, and the main fruit-bearing branches are evenly distributed.

### **The three goals of training are to develop:**

1. a strong central trunk with 9 to 13 main scaffold branches, well separated in two to three tiers. Some branches will be removed as the tree approaches maturity;
2. branches with wide crotch angles ( $45^{\circ}$  to  $60^{\circ}$ ) and many evenly spaced fruiting laterals of varying lengths;
3. an open, pyramidal form capable of supporting a crop on strong lateral branches.

### **What to do at planting time:**

1. If your new trees are whips (without limbs), head 28 to 34 inches above the ground. This stimulates new lateral branches.
2. If your trees are branched, remove all limbs within 20 inches of the ground. If wide-angled ( $45^{\circ}$  to  $60^{\circ}$ ) branches are present at planting time, keep four or five. Head at 40 inches to stimulate additional laterals.

### **What to do in the first growing season:**

1. When the new shoots are six to eight inches long, select the most vigorous upright-growing shoot as the central leader, and remove any others that compete with the new leader.
2. As scaffold branches develop, establish wide crotch angles by spreading or remove limbs with very narrow angles. If they appear narrower than  $45^{\circ}$  to  $60^{\circ}$ , use spring-type clothespins or toothpicks to spread potential scaffold branches to desired positions.

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