

Fruit Tree Pruning: Different Methods for Different Fruit

Apple varieties are grafted on rootstocks that produce dwarf, semi-dwarf, and other sizes smaller than standard size trees. Smaller trees need less pruning, but a central leader or vertical axis should be maintained. (To be discussed in future articles).

Pruning should be mostly corrective. Also thin new growth on mature trees to encourage development of spurs on older wood and keep tree to desired size. Don't be afraid to open your trees up. More light to the center of the tree produces better fruit. Don't make a lot of heading cuts on the perimeter of the tree. This only leads to a dense tree with smaller, inferior fruit.

Apples mainly produce fruit on spurs two-years-old or older. Spurs produce one year, rest for a year, then produce again, and can last for many years. Keep spur preservation in mind when pruning apples.

Pears produce spurs similar to apples and require similar pruning methods. Pear limbs tend to grow vertically, so always train the tree to broaden it by making heading cuts to a strong outside growing branch. Be aware of fireblight in pears and apples. Always remove dead and dying branches quickly.

Apricots require heavy pruning for good production. Fruit is borne on short spurs from last year's growth. Prune to conserve new growth (last year's new shoots) to replace older spurs. To stimulate new productive growth, cut older branches back to a strong, younger lateral.

Peaches grow vigorously; their fruit is borne on the new growth from the previous year. The new growth only bears once, so pruning is done to produce new growth. Fewer and larger fruits can be obtained by selectively thinning new shoots so that less bloom and fruit forms. The biggest complaint about peaches is too many small fruit produced. Don't hesitate to remove many of the small new shoots. Remove 2 out of 3 of last year's shoots (thinning cut), or head back each branch to one third its length, or do some of both.

Plums are generally trained to a vase or open center shape; however, pyramid forms are possible on dwarf or half standard size trees. All plums make vigorous shoot growth and require some pruning to keep the tree more open, reduce the amount of fruit, and improve fruit size. To contain tree diameter, cut back to lateral branches and/or vertical branches. If your tree is too tall, remove large upright branches. Many mature trees only require thinning out of annual shoot growth.

Brian Finnigan is a retired UI Extension Educator, has a small orchard and prunes and grafts professionally. (208) 680-2430. finnbnc@yahoo.com