
PRUNING YOUR BACKYARD FRUIT TREES

PRUNING – WHAT IS IT?

It's a method for developing and maintaining woody plants and trees which includes:

- Removing dead or diseased wood
- Invigorating older and/or neglected specimens by stimulating a growth response

WHY DO IT?

- To keep a fruit tree's interior open to sunlight and air circulation (sunlight not only helps ripen fruit, it strengthens and creates more fruiting wood as well)
- To keep it in balance via tree shape and branch spacing
- To create young wood where fruit will form in the future

WHAT HAPPENS IF WE DON'T PRUNE?

Too many branches will develop, blocking sunlight from reaching the interior of the tree. The tree may grow severely out of balance and be more susceptible to branches breaking.

HOW TO PRUNE

HEADING CUTS

Invigorate and stimulate regrowth close to the pruning cut. Without heading cuts, the tree will not make branches and will grow tall (apical dominance, especially plum and sweet cherry). Make heading cuts to remove apical dominance and encourage branching. When making heading cuts, angle the cuts at about 45 degrees away from the nearest outward-facing bud or stem.

THINNING CUTS

Are less invigorating and help maintain the tree in its natural form. Thinning out the inside of tree to admit more light will encourage fruiting spurs to develop. Without thinning cuts, the growth is too dense and will shade the lower wood, which inhibits flower bud formation. Do not leave a stub when thinning.

WHEN TO PRUNE DECIDUOUS FRUIT TREES

WINTER

- Prune out **4 D's**: the **Dead, Damaged, Diseased & Disoriented** (e.g. branches pointing inward, downward, crossing other branches at an odd angle, or straight up).
- Prune for shape, using mostly **thinning cuts**. The ideal branch angle is diagonal, radiating up and out from the center of the tree.
- Prune a bit more heavily to increase a tree's vigor.

- Prune for easier access to harvest fruit from the tree later on.

SUMMER

- **Prune out 4 D's: the Dead, Damaged, Diseased & Disoriented** (e.g. branches pointing inward, downward, crossing other branches at an odd angle, or straight up).
- Prune for size, using **heading cuts** to shorten tall or leggy branches.
- Prune lightly, focusing on bringing down tree height.
- Prune to decrease the vigor in an overly-vigorous tree.

YEAR-ROUND

- Remove suckers from the base of the tree or out in the yard where roots may wander.

THE RARE EXCEPTIONS: Apricots and Cherries are pruned only in late summer (July or August) when rain is least likely (rain can carry Eutypa fungal spores which can enter fresh pruning cuts and cause die-off).

WHEN TO PRUNE CITRUS TREES

YEAR-ROUND

- Except for Grapefruit and Pomeelos, which must be pruned **ONLY** in cold weather, i.e., January/February/Early March.
- Prune out the **4 D's**. Citrus often have a lot of dead branches and twigs in the center of the tree.
- Remove suckers from the base of the tree and water sprouts (rogue branches that grow straight up, do not bear fruit and have big thorns).
- Prune out redundant branches: when there are several parallel-running branches occupying the same space, choose one to keep and prune out one or more of the others.
- Prune to open the center of the tree for better air circulation and more sunlight.
- Prune for easier access to harvest fruit from the tree.

TREES THAT ARE PRUNED IN WINTER ONLY (DORMANT PRUNING)

- **FIGS**
- **PERSIMMONS & OTHER LATE-FRUITING VARIETIES**
- **GRAPEFRUIT AND POMELOS**

TREES THAT ARE SUMMER-PRUNED ONLY

- **CHERRIES**
- **APRICOTS**

SOME PRUNING TIPS

Before you prune, step back and note:

- Is there sufficient air movement through the tree?
- Is there sufficient sunlight penetration to the center of the tree all the way down to the lowest branches?
- Has the tree reached its ultimate, mature shape?
- Is every side of the tree ACCESSIBLE? Backyard fruit trees should be kept size-wise on a more or less human scale for ease of care, pruning, fruit thinning (culling) and harvesting.
- Is the INSIDE of the tree accessible? If branches are sticking out on every side, preventing you access to the center of the tree, choose a few spots around the tree where you can prune some less important branches away (these are often branches that go sideways instead of out and up). Sacrificing a few branches is worth it, to be able to care for every part of your tree.