**Primetime**

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**Fruit Tree Care**

February is a good time to plant fruit trees and it is an important month for fruit tree care. It is the month to spray dormant oil, fertilize, prune, and even begin the insecticide sprays.

Dormant oil is an organic control that when applied to the bark and branches of certain plants suffocates the insects that are overwintering on or in the bark.

The most obvious target is scale insects on fruit trees, hollies, euonymus, sago palms, and other plants.

Recognize scale as small (pea size) circles of calcium attached to the bark. Scale is usually white and can resemble a fungus growth, but some are brown and relatively hard to see. Underneath the calcium cover is a small insect that makes its living by sucking the juices from the plant to which it is attached. The result is a weakened plant that expresses the insects attack by diminished and yellowish foliage.

Obtain dormant oil from your favorite source of pesticides and dilute it for application from a backpack or pump-up sprayer. Spray it on the bark and stems to the point it begins to drip off.

Dilution rates will be stated on the container label. They may be different if you are spraying evergreen plants like citrus or deciduous plants such as peaches. The label will also state the necessity of waiting to spray until 2 days (48 hours) are forecast where temperatures are above 45ºF. If you are spraying deciduous fruit trees such as pears, peaches, plums, and apples including some Kocide in the dormant oil spray will help control bacterial diseases as well.

Scale is an important target of dormant oil but you will also obtain reasonable control of phylloxera and other aphids on pecan trees from dormant oil. Phylloxera is the insect that causes the deformed leaves on so many pecan trees. The problem can be so bad in some neighborhoods that a commercial sprayer is brought in so branches in the crown can also be sprayed.

Fertilize fruit trees in February by applying one cup of slow release or winterizer lawn fertilizer per inch of diameter on the drip line of the tree.

February is also the month to prune fruit trees. The idea is to remove dead and diseased wood, improve the fruit bearing structure of the tree and to open the tree to light and air. Pruning also allows you to control the height and shape of your tree. Harvesting fruit from a ladder is anathema to insurance companies that work with commercial orchards. It is just as unsafe for home gardeners as well.

Each fruit species is pruned differently. For a peach tree first remove all suckers that emerges from the root system at the base of the tree. Second cut out all dead and diseased branches at their origin in a live branch. The main scaffolding of the tree is provided by 3 or 4 branches that emerge from different points of the central trunk. The scaffold branches should extend from the trunk at about a 60º angle for maximum strength. The middle of the enclosure formed by the scaffolds is cleared out to allow air and sun to penetrate. The fruit bearing wood is last year’s growth that emerges from the side branches that emerge from the scaffold. A wine glass with the trunk as the stem and the growth on the scaffolds as the thick sides of the glass should remain. Height is reduced by beginning with the highest branch and cutting it at its origin. The next highest branch is then cut and so forth until height is reduced to 8 feet or less so that the ripe peaches can be reached from the ground.

For instructions and diagrams on pruning visit “[www.plantanswers.com](http://www.plantanswers.com).”