

Pruning Fruit Trees

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For consistent production of large, well colored, blemish-free fruit, pruning is nearly as important as controlling pests. Pruning can also make it easier for you to reach and harvest your fruit. February is the month to prune your fruit trees.

For all fruit trees, the first step is to remove all dead and wounded wood. Next, cut out all suckers. Suckers are stems that arise from the roots or below the graft.

Peaches and Plums – Peaches and plums are usually pruned to an open vase form, much like hybrid tea roses. Three or four main branches called scaffolds that arise at about 60° out of the trunk form the vase. The open middle allows air and sunlight to penetrate to the fruit borne on the sides of the vase. Fruit is produced on new wood. Recognize it by its red color. Peaches and plums produce three or four times as much fruit as the tree can support so do not hesitate to remove a considerable number of the new wood branches and stems.

Branches growing on the main scaffolds that point into the middle of the tree or towards the ground are removed. Most branches that are targeted for removal should be cut at their origin in the scaffold or sub-scaffold branches. Such a cut is called a thinning cut. A hedging cut is one where a portion or stub of a branch remains above its origin.

In peaches and plums there may also be some branches that emerge from the scaffold branches that grow straight into the air with very few buds or side branches. Remove them at their origin as well.

The new wood that is left should be sturdy enough to hold one or more piece of fruit until maturity. Leave a collection of small stems at the center of the vase to provide leaves that protect the trunk and scaffolds from sun burn.

Apples and Pears – Apples and pears do not grow as fast as peaches or plums. They also produce fruit on older wood so do not have to be pruned to stimulate new growth. Prune apples and pears to a central leader or modified central leader shape. Branches emerge from the central leader much like a spiral staircase around a central pole would.

The branches emerging from the central stem are pruned so that the leader is obviously the highest reaching stem.

In peaches and plums, most major cuts are thinning cuts. With apples and pears, hedging cuts are often appropriate. The amount of wood removed from apples and pears should be significantly less than that removed from peaches.

Citrus – Citrus is tolerant of pruning, but it is usually unnecessary. Again, remove suckers and dead wood but the tree does not need to be opened up. Only as necessary to fit tight spaces, citrus trees can be pruned to remove height or width with thinning or hedging cuts.

Figs and Pomegranates – Remove a few of the oldest stems at soil level each year to encourage yearly production of new stems without removing productive old wood.

Blackberries – It is best if the canes that produced fruit are removed sometime after harvest. If you did not remove them last Spring, remove all the old spent stems now so that they do not interfere with your harvesting efforts. They can also be disease reservoirs.

Before or after you prune your peach, apple, pear, citrus or plum trees, apply dormant or horticultural oil. The oil is an organic control that suffocates scale insects and other pests that winter in the bark crevices. Watch the weather prediction for two days in a row where temperatures will be 45°F or higher. Follow the label instructions closely.

For diagrams and more detailed instructions on pruning and other cultural practices, visit plantanswers.com.