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Pruning Fruit Trees

By D. Dentino Master Gardener

Limit the number of scaffold branches to 4 or 5. Then cut back any excessively long branches (wood that has been allowed to grow for several years unchecked). Find a good branch point for the cut to avoid dead heading. The first bud below the cut will produce the most vigorous growth (take over as a leader) and in general determine shape. The second bud's growth will be about 30% less and the third diminishes by the same amount. The remaining buds produce fruit spikes but will not affect the general shape of the tree.

Proceed as follows:

- Remove all crossing branches.
- Remove all branches growing straight up.
- Remove all branches growing down from a major scaffold limb.
- Remove all unsightly, dead or damaged wood.
- Space vertical growth about 8 to 10" apart.
- Space horizontal secondaries 6 to 8" apart.
- Space horizontal bud sprouts 2 -3 inches apart.
- Remove old (weak) bud sprouts

Don't be afraid to remove old wood. A vigorous tree will produce new and better wood. The most common problem among non-professional pruners is leaving too much wood. The shape of a tree is a gradual taper from trunk to tip. Any unintentional deviation from this pattern requires corrective (cut it out) pruning.

Prune for future appearance. How do you want it to look 2 - 3 or 5 years ahead. Keep fruit tree branches within easy reach. Can you reach the fruit from the ground or a short ladder?

APPLES

Prune to a central or modified central-leader shape.
Space branches to allow sunlight throughout the tree. Leave fruit spurs (they look like thumbs).

APRICOTS

Prune to a vase (open center) shape.
Leave fattest buds. Thin for sunlight penetration - about 6 inches between laterals. Don't cut back remaining laterals until you determine where best fruit grows. Most common is the upper third portion hence no cutback.

CITRUS

Pruning is not generally required however, some thinning to improve appearance and to access fruit may be desirable. All fruit should be reachable without getting scratched by a thorn. Oranges more commonly have some natural dieback throughout the tree. This should be removed once or twice a year.

CHERRIES

Prune to a modified central-leader shape

Remove all spurs and branches not producing fruit. On sour cherries, remove all 3 - 5 year wood.

PEACHES

Prune to a vase (open center) shape.

Remove about 60% of new growth leaving 1 year old twigs about 1 foot apart throughout tree. Cut these back 1/3.

PLUMS

Prune to a vase (open center) shape.

Space laterals 5 to 6 inches apart. Leave viable older fruit wood (small old-looking branches).

Cut new whips back 2/3. Prune again after fruit is picked to promote fruitwood growth vs vigorous canes.

BLACKBERRIES

Fruit is produced on 2nd year stems. Remove these after fruit is picked.

FIGS

Prune to a vase (open center) shape.

Remove branches touching ground. Prune only during dormant season.

THINNING FRUIT - Thinning increases both size and quality of fruit. Thin when fruit is approximately 1/2 inch in diameter.

Apples - 1 apple per cluster 6" apart.

Peaches & Nectarines 4 - 6 inches apart.

Apricots and Plums 2 - 3 inches apart.

Books:

All About Pruning - Ortho Books

Pruning Made Easy - Hill, Lewis

Royal/American Horticultural Society Pruning - Christopher Brickell

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Source: Perley Payne, retired Farm Advisor, UCCE Santa Clara County