

Now is the Time to Prune Fruit Trees

by Jack Bennett

Winter is an appropriate time to prune fruit trees (except for apricots*). Successful pruning can be done during spring and summer*, but the absence of leaves in winter provides a clear view of the tree branches and overall structure. People can successfully prune their own fruit trees if they follow a few simple rules.

First, remember that annual pruning enhances fruit production and controls the size of the tree. Learn the difference between fruiting wood and vegetative growth. It's possible to prune out too much of the fruiting wood or spurs, resulting in few blossoms and little fruit. There's a great chart at <https://anrcatalog.ucanr.edu/pdf/8057.pdf> that tells where fruiting buds are located on various kinds of fruit trees and how much to prune them.



This 2-year-old branch is being shortened back to a 1-year-old fruiting branch.

When you prune, use a ladder. To avoid damage or broken branches, do not climb the tree or pull branches toward you. Try not to remove more than twenty five percent of the tree canopy in a single year. Severe pruning can shift the tree from fruit production to growth.

Walk around your tree and look for weak, dead, diseased or crossing branches. Also, look for the growth of “suckers” from the base of the tree. Remove all of these branches and sprouts first, using a sharp pair of pruning shears, a lopper, or a small saw, depending on the size of the wood.

Remember no two people prune a tree in the same way. The late Chuck Ingels, University of California Farm Advisor, said, “There are many ways to train and prune deciduous fruit trees, and no single method is right for all situations and needs.” <https://anrcatalog.ucanr.edu/pdf/8057.pdf>. Do not be afraid to make mistakes. A healthy tree will outgrow any “errors” you might make.

Think of the final shape you want for your tree. In most cases that may be a scaffold of 3 to 4 main branches in the shape of a vase or wine glass with upward pointing branches and an open center for good air circulation.

When deciding where to prune, remember that a cut encourages growth from the bud just below the cut. Choose a bud that faces in the direction you want new growth to occur. Cut cleanly at approximately a forty-five-degree angle about one quarter of an inch above the selected bud. The forty-five-degree angle allows water to drain off the cut surface, reducing the possibility of rot. **DO NOT LEAVE A STUB!** A long dead stub above a bud provides an excellent entry point for borers. If you are removing a branch back to the trunk of the tree look for the rounded “collar” at the base of the branch and cut just outside its outer edge, so as to not leave a stub. Leaving the bark branch collar intact allows the tree to “roll” tissue over the wound to seal off the injury.

Remove vigorous upright shoots (“water sprouts”) and most competing branches growing straight up into the tree. Upright branches are generally vegetative (stems and green leaves); horizontal branches are more fruitful.

If you have peaches and nectarines, remove fifty percent of last year’s growth. For figs, apples, pears, plums and apricots remove twenty to thirty percent of last year’s growth. Be sure to remove all leaves and old fruit or failed blossoms. Rake the area thoroughly of all litter and branches to be sure no insect eggs or diseased material is left around the tree. To protect your tree from sunburn and borers (especially in winter) paint the trunk of the tree with a fifty-fifty mix of interior white latex paint and water.

There is much that can be said about fruit and nut tree pruning. For more information, check out the University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources free publications at: <https://anrcatalog.ucanr.edu/Items.aspx?search=Fruit%20Tree%20Pruning>.

If you have inherited an overgrown, long-neglected fruit tree, one of the free downloadable publications on this site is titled “Fruit Trees: Pruning Overgrown Deciduous Trees.”

* Note: apricots are susceptible to a branch-killing disease called eutypa dieback; the disease organism is carried into pruning cuts by splashing rain or irrigation. Prune apricots after harvest in July and August when six weeks of dry weather can be predicted.

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UCCE Master Gardeners of Tuolumne and Calaveras Counties can answer home gardening questions. Call 209-533-5912 or go to: <http://ucanr.edu/survey/survey.cfm?surveynumber=7269> to fill out our easy-to-use problem questionnaire. Check out our website at: http://cecentralsierra.ucanr.edu/Master_Gardeners/ You can also find us on Facebook.