

# To restore or not to restore



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Ask a Master Gardener

**Q**uestion: I've recently moved here and my property has a huge old apple tree on it. It looks like it's been neglected for years. How do I get it back into shape so it's producing good fruit?

**A**nsWER: First of all, you need to decide whether it's best to save the tree or just remove it and start over with a new planting.

To restore a fruit tree that hasn't been pruned in years requires diligence and patience, pruning the tree back over several years as well as sticking to a routine spray program. Here's some guidelines that might help your decision:

■ Take a look at the trunk of the tree. Does it seem sound? Is it free of rot in the center?

■ Does the tree seem to be healthy overall – free of any signs of disease or limb dieback?

■ How about the fruit it produces – do you like the variety of apples it produces?

■ Are you physically capable of caring for a large tree? Most old trees require the use of a ladder to properly prune, harvest fruit and spray them.

■ Is the tree in a good location, fitting in with your landscape or garden?

If you answer “no” to most of these guidelines, consider cutting down the



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**Using a three-legged orchard ladder — which are safer than conventional ladders for such jobs — climb as high in the center of the tree as you intend to pick, and cut the main scaffold limbs down to the height you can reach. Remove any dead wood, overlapping limbs or limbs that hang down. Don't head them, but remove them entirely at their base.**

tree. Abandoned fruit trees harbor insect pests and can spread diseases to other neighboring orchards.

If you are still determined to restore your tree, you need to start a program of renovation that usually takes three to four crop years.

The goal in restoring an old apple tree is to reduce the tree's height, increase the vigor of the fruiting wood, open the tree to let light in and make it more accessible for spraying and picking.

**Step 1:** First Year – Reduce the tree height in the dormant season. Use a 14 foot, three-legged orchard ladder for the job. They are much safer. If the tree is 20 foot in

height, it's okay to shorten the tree's height by 6-8 feet, about 1/3, with the first pruning.

On your ladder, climb as high in the center of the tree as you intend to pick, and cut the main scaffold limbs down to the height you can reach. Remove any dead wood, overlapping limbs or limbs that hang down. Thin out most of the upright shoots, leaving some of the smaller ones. Don't head them, but remove them entirely at their base. Keep the center free of limbs to allow light to penetrate.

**Step 2:** Second Year – During the summer before the second dormant season, check the results

of the previous season's pruning. Remove most large vigorous new shoots at the top of the tree.

Leave a few minor shoots that don't shade much. New shoots that developed lower down off the main trunk or scaffolds should be left alone. The idea is to get the tree to produce more new fruit wood in the lower canopy.

When winter arrives, decide on the desired final height of the tree – you probably can't safely reduce it more than 2 feet from the first major pruning. Keep thinning out shoots in the upper half, spacing the main limbs uniformly for the new fruiting wood. Train new shoots off the trunk

outward, not straight up. Shorten limbs on the outside of the tree to expose the new lower limbs to more sunlight.

**Step 3:** Third Year – In the summer of the third year, remove about half of the new shoots that formed at the top of the tree, removing the most vigorous first. In the dormant season, continue to shape the tree, shortening the outer branches by 1-2 feet.

Keep the new fruiting wood spread evenly over the whole tree. You should be getting lots of needed light and air penetration now to all limbs. Keep up this process of pruning each year to maintain the height

you've chosen and thin out the fruit wood.

You can really help your tree from the start by clearing away tall grass or brush from around the trunk of the tree all the way out to the drip line, and laying down a layer of mulch consisting of aged manure or compost to retain moisture and discourage weeds and grass.

It's also a good idea to check the pH of your soil near the tree. If the pH is too acidic, you can help the tree's ability to take up nutrients by adding lime. Garden supply stores have simple soil test kits to check the pH.

Finally, be sure and start a regular spray program with dormant oils and fungicides, applying them every dormant season to ward off insect infestations and diseases. Contact the Master Gardener Plant Clinic for a helpful spray schedule for fruit trees.

The advantage of renovating your old apple tree is that you can still enjoy harvesting its fruit during the process every year instead of waiting a number of years for your young sapling to produce.

To download an excellent pamphlet on this topic from OSU Extension that contains more information along with illustrations, go to [www.bit.ly/38JGkbt](http://www.bit.ly/38JGkbt).

*Do you have a gardening question? Contact the Douglas County Master Gardeners via email at [douglasmg@oregonstate.edu](mailto:douglasmg@oregonstate.edu), by phone at 541-672-4461 or visit 1134 SE Douglas Ave., Roseburg.*