

Winter fruit tree pruning and pest control

If you would like to produce more food from your yard think about planting a few fruit trees. Just a few trees can produce enough fruit to last you for many months if done properly. However, growing tree fruit in your backyard does take some knowledge and time. Without committing to both you will be disappointed with the results.

Most fruit trees sold these days are on semi-dwarf rootstocks that require a minimum space of 12 feet by 12 feet to grow well. Your pruning style should plan to keep these trees within that space.

Pruning and pest control are the most important winter activities for fruit trees. You should do the majority of the pruning in January or February when trees have lost their leaves and are dormant. In the first four to five years, most of the pruning will be light with a focus on training the form of the tree. Pruning a little each year to train the tree keeps the work load light. The Extension office has a very good publication, "Training and Pruning

Your Home Orchard" (PNW 400), showing training and pruning methods.

The recommended training form for apple and pear trees is called a central leader form. The idea is to develop a Christmas tree shape, one main trunk and branches coming off the trunk at about 60 degree angles growing outward. The lowest branches will begin about 3 feet off the ground and each successive branch level will arise from the trunk about 1.5 feet above the previous branches.

The lowest branches on the tree are the longest and as you go higher the branches keep getting shorter. This allows excellent light to hit all areas of the tree. In most years you will just thin out aggressive new branches to retain this shape.

When training or pruning stone fruit trees (cherry, peach, plum, prune, and apricot) you will want to create an open vase form. Most of the main branches arise off of the trunk about 30



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Extension Spotlight

inches above the ground where the tree was topped when young. The young tree should have 4-5 branches that grow outward in all directions around the

trunk but the center of the tree is always kept open to sunlight.

The outward growing branches will have fruiting wood that gets good sun from the top and outer canopy. When pruning these trees you will want to thin out excessive new wood to maintain good light and reduce the potential fruit load each year that can cause limb breakage. Pruning is the first step to getting quality fruit by opening the tree's canopy to light, reducing fruit load and making the tree easily accessible for spraying.

No matter what kind of fruit tree you are growing, dormant oil and fungicide sprays are very helpful to keep your tree healthy from insect eggs, pupae, or adults that are overwintering on your trees.

For homeowners, follow a



COURTESY OF STEVE RENQUIST

A pear tree trained to a single trunk leader system receives a dormant spray by author Steve Renquist after it was pruned.

winter spray program that includes dormant oil to control insects, copper based fungicides to control diseases like peach leaf curl and a variety of trunk and limb canker diseases on all fruit trees. The copper fungicide will also prevent or kill overwintering moss that can buildup on your trees over the years.

Good pruning and dormant

sprays are critical to crop load management and a healthy tree for years to come.

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