

Pruning those Fruit Trees

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Fruit trees are extremely popular in the area, but most people don't realize the amount of care they need. They often need to be fertilized and watered regularly, managed for pests and diseases, and pruned yearly. If you plant a peach tree and don't prune it, you'll end up with tall, out-of-reach branches that go straight up which can be difficult to correct.

The majority of deciduous fruit trees are best pruned between December and February while they are dormant. This is also the best time to plant fruit trees because it gives them time to establish root systems early in the year in order to withstand the summer heat. Training, or pruning, your fruit tree should begin at planting.

Trees respond to pruning by not only dwarfing the tree — making fruit picking easier — but also invigorating it by stimulating branching. The benefits of pruning and training include promoting a strong framework, aiding in the development and maintenance of a desirable tree size and shape, and increasing fruit size and quality. It also reduces the incidence of disease and allows for easier pest management.

The most common pruning cuts are heading-back cuts, thinning-out cuts, and cutting back to lateral shoots. The heading-back cuts removes part of the branch which allows more branching to occur. Thinning-out cuts is when the entire shoot or limb is removed. When you are cutting back to lateral shoots, you prune the branch up to another shoot that is coming out.

Peaches, nectarines, and plums have a specific training program. The goal for peaches and nectarines especially is to create an open vase look to the tree so that the fruit is easier to pick and allows light to get into the center. These trees are also thinned out during the summer.

Since plums tend to grow more upright and branch more densely, they can be trained with an open center or a modified leader system. You can get step-by-step directions on how to train and prune your stone fruit trees at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/hs365>.

Apple trees do best with a modified center leader system with five to seven well-spaced scaffold limbs going in different directions. Often the angles of the limbs need to be spread so that they can support more fruit. This can be done with propping clothes pins between the trunk and young shoots. The clothes pins are removed in mid-summer once the tissue hardens.

If you haven't pruned your tree in a while, your tree may look bushy, leading to slow growth and poor quality fruit. You need to prune it to get more light into the interior of the tree. Remove vigorous, upright shoots from the interior of the tree and remove any suckers from the base. Select some branches with wide angles and

thin out the remaining limbs. Shorten the scaffold limbs by about a 1/4 by using heading cuts and cutting back to the lateral shoots.

With any tree, remove any diseased or damage wood. If the tree has a history of pests or diseases, use may need to spray it with a dormant oil or fungicide to protect it. To treat for scales and mites, apply dormant horticultural oil twice 10-14 days apart when the temperature is between 40° and 85°F and before bud break. For bacterial spot, apply a sulfur-based product and chlorothalonil for leaf curl before blooms or leaves appear. It is very important that you follow the label.