

## When to Prune Your Citrus Tree

By: Dr. Denise DeBusk, Environmental & Community Horticulture Agent

(Article published in *Gainesville Sun* on March 5, 2016)

Is your satsuma tree being propped up by boards or chairs like mine? Did you get a lot of small or dry fruit this year? Although typically dooryard citrus does not need to be pruned, there are some benefits to selective pruning of your tree. Before you grab your chainsaw and let out some aggression, this article will tell you when, how, and if you should prune your tree.



Citrus trees are pruned for many reasons including aesthetic purposes, to prevent shading or crowding of other plants, to remove cold-damaged limbs, to reduce pest or disease problems, and to keep fruit somewhat within reach. It can also rejuvenate old trees with reduced vigor, dieback, or small fruit. Pruning should be done for a specific reason because less leaf material means less fruit.

Timing is important when pruning citrus. The best time is for pruning, especially severe pruning, is after the danger of freezing temperatures has past and just before the spring growth flush, so about now. Do not prune after September because late growth is more susceptible to cold injury.

Pruning should be done carefully. Citrus bark is thin and easily damaged. Do not cut the branch flush with the trunk or larger branch, but at a slight angle so that the branch collar is not damaged. The branch collar is the ridge or wrinkled bark around the base of the branch. Proper pruning will allow the branch to heal over.

Large and heavy branches require three separate cut to keep the bark from stripping. The first cut is made on the underside about 15 inches from the trunk. The second cut is made downward from the top about 18 inches from the trunk. The limb will split and lighten the load. Cut the remaining stub (third cut) by beginning on the outside the tree bark ridge and end outside the branch collar.

If major pruning exposes previously shaded branches to sunlight, the area needs to be protected from sunburn. Sunburn can cause bark cracking and cankers. You can paint the branches with a 1:1 mixture of interior latex paint and water to protect them.

Young trees can occasionally benefit from a little pruning but do not require as much training as other fruit trees. You want to remove suckers from the base of the tree. Those come from the rootstock and the fruit will not taste good. If the tree is becoming too tall or spindly, the tree can be topped which will promote side shoots and a lower, fuller canopy. Cut the top right above a branch pointing

outward with the same pruning technique. Do not remove more than a third of the height at a time.

For general maintenance, remove discolored, damaged, or dead wood from the trees throughout the year. You should also remove any crossing branches or branches that shade out lower branches.

Occasionally, you can get water sprouts or gourmands. They are long, thick, very vigorous and fast-growing branches which sap the nutrients and water out of the tree. They stay vegetative for a number of years and may produce poor quality fruit that is large, rough, or dry. Remove them at the base.

For satsuma mandarins, they tend to have branches that hang to the ground, or skirt branches. This can cause problems with weeding, fertilizer applications, ants, and diseases. As fashionable as boards and chairs are, these trees should be skirted up to a foot and half to two feet above the ground every couple of years.

Trees can also be thinned. If you can't see dappled sunlight on the ground beneath the tree at midday, then may want to thin it out. This can increase fruiting in the center and improve air flow. Thinning the canopy can also reduce insect and disease problems.

You can get more information on citrus pruning (with photos) on <http://solutionsforyourlife.ufl.edu/>. There is also a free class at the UF/IFAS Extension Alachua County office on "Fruit Trees for Your Landscape" on Mar. 17 from 6:30 to 8 p.m. Register by calling 352-337-6209.

*Dr. Denise DeBusk is the Environmental and Community Horticulture Extension Agent for UF/IFAS Extension Alachua County. She can be contacted at [ddebusk@ufl.edu](mailto:ddebusk@ufl.edu) or 352-955-2402.*