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Pruning Peach Trees Proper pruning will yield the best fruit

By Larry A. Sagers

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The "queen of fruits" is the peach, as no other fruit has the compelling fragrance and flavor of this delightful summer treat.

Utah-grown peaches are far better than those that are shipped in, because we can let them ripen on the tree, rather than picking them when they're hard and tasteless.

If you are going to grow peaches, you must learn to prune the trees. While some fruit trees will produce fruit with minimal pruning, peaches are not among them. Unless peach trees are pruned heavily each season, they quit growing new wood and stop producing fruit.

Because pruning is so important, Jay Dee Gunnell, Utah State University Extension Service horticulturist in Davis County, will be teaching pruning classes this spring. Gunnell said that when growing fruit trees, it is important to understand both pruning and training. Pruning is removing selected parts of the plant to get a desired growth response. Pruning is a part of training, but training makes the tree conform to a selected shape.

In general, Gunnell recommends the open-center system for peach trees and other stone fruits. "Look at the tree as if it is a satellite dish or a solar collector. An open center system means higher quality fruit from better solar exposure," he said.

It's ironic that the shade a tree casts on itself is one of the most limiting factors in producing high-quality, sweet fruit. Pruning keeps the tree open to let in light. The light gets leaves to produce sugars and it develops nice fruit color.

"When training a peach tree to the open-center system, you want to develop three or four scaffold branches coming off the main trunk starting about 18 inches off the ground," Gunnell said. "Space the branches evenly around the trunks going out in four different directions."

Branch angle is critical. Try to develop branches coming off the main trunk at 45- to 90-degree angles. These create strong branches that support the fruit crop without breaking down the tree. By contrast, narrow or V-shaped crotch angles are weak.

After developing the four main scaffold branches, work on developing secondary scaffolds. These should start about four feet out on the branches, providing plenty of space to grow the fruit. The main scaffolds are like spokes on a wheel; the secondary scaffold fills in the areas in between with productive fruiting wood.

After you develop a tree to a selected system, you must prune to maintain the tree production, Gunnell said. "Peaches bear on 1-year-old wood or the wood that grew last season. Pruning them is an act of regulating tree growth for next year's crop while managing the fruit buds for this year's crop."

"As you prune, thin out the limbs so that you leave enough space to grow a three-inch peach. That means you need to thin out the branches so they are at least 6 inches apart. Also keep in mind that you need to space the fruit along the branch."

He further recommends that you look at the color of the wood to determine what and how much to remove.

Gunnell said gray-colored wood is not productive, because it is weak and supports few viable fruit buds. Without an abundance of healthy buds, you'll never get a good crop of fruit.

"Look for the brightly colored, red wood as it is the productive wood," Gunnell said. "If you have too much of the unproductive gray wood, you need to rejuvenate the tree by pruning it back even more so you force the new red wood to grow the following season."

Gunnell offers this final advice: "Most people do not prune their peaches heavy enough. If you have a well-cared-for tree, you will take off about 50 percent of the brightly colored 1-year-old red wood — or the wood that grew last year."

Larry Sagers is the horticulture specialist, Utah State University Extension at Thanksgiving Point.