



GARDEN NOTES

PRUNING FOR DUMMIES

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Most people worry too much about pruning. Which branches or twigs do I remove and which do I keep? Will it hurt the tree if too much wood is removed? Is it necessary to seal the wound with something? How will pruning affect the fruit production? Can I afford to pay someone else to do this?

Most people make pruning too difficult and worrisome, says Jerry Goodspeed, Utah State University Extension horticulturist. Generally pruning does not kill, or even seriously damage a tree; and, if done somewhat correctly it helps them bear more and better quality fruit. The trick is knowing how to do it “somewhat correctly.”

There are three things to keep in mind when pruning, he explains. First, know where the fruit grows on the tree. This avoids the problem of removing all the fruit spurs or buds before they even have a chance to bloom. Most fruit trees produce fruit on spurs (except peaches and nectarines).

“Spurs are found on wood that is two years old or older,” Goodspeed says. “A spur resembles a small, pudgy stem. Someone once complained to me that the only thing their tree produced was stubby, fat stems, so they removed them in hopes the tree would grow longer ones. They also wondered why they had no fruit after they removed all the spurs. Leave all those short, chubby stems; then, you and the tree will be happier. Look on apple, pear, cherry, apricot, and plum trees for these squatty spurs.”

However, peach and nectarine trees are different, he says. Instead of producing spurs, they form fruit on last year's growth. This wood is normally a slightly orange to purple color, and is found on the ends of the branches. Knowing where the fruit is borne, can prevent removal of all the wood that produces it.

The second step of pruning is to walk around the tree and clean it up, Goodspeed says. Remove all the wood that is broken, dead, diseased or that hits you in the head. This is also the time to remove branches that rub or cross and any suckers and water sprouts.

“Suckers are those nasty twigs that grow straight up around the base of the tree,” he adds. “Water sprouts are basically suckers growing straight up inside the tree. They can reach six feet in one year. Water sprouts often arise from pruning cuts made the previous year, and can be very

numerous in apple and pear trees.”

After cleaning the tree, prune it to allow sunlight to penetrate into the canopy, he says. Light should be able to reach the inner trunk of most fruit trees. If the tree is too crowded, simply remove some branches so the light can filter through the tree into the center. Over time, leaving a tree unpruned allows the branches to become more and more shaded. Spurs require light to thrive. Spurs on fruit tree branches that receive little if any light soon begin to die. After a while only inferior quality fruit develops on the outer branches of such crowded trees.

There are a few other things to keep in mind when pruning, Goodspeed says. First, never remove more than a third of the tree in any given year. Removing more than that causes fruit trees to go into shock. If an older tree has not been pruned for a while, and requires a lot of wood removal, consider doing it over a two or three year period.

Make pruning cuts clean by using a sharp cutting instrument, he says. Never top a tree. Make sure the cuts are back to a lateral or another branch. Pruning cuts do not require any spray, salve or band-aids to help them heal. Trees mend their own cuts quicker and better if left alone.

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