

TEN BASICS OF WHEN AND HOW TO PRUNE FRUIT TREES

by Paul Vossen

1. Prune fruit trees when the leaves are off (dormant). It's easier to see what you are doing and removal of dormant buds (growing points) invigorates the remaining buds. Summer pruning removes leaves (food manufacturer), slows fruit ripening, and exposes fruit to sunburn. Summer pruning can be used, however, to slow down overly vigorous trees or trees that are too large. It is most effective in early summer.
2. Right after planting a new tree, cut it off to a short stick 24 to 30 inches high and cut any side shoots remaining below that to 1-2 buds. This encourages low branching and equalizes the top and root system. Paint the tree with white latex paint to protect it from sunburn and borer attack.
3. Low vigor, young trees should be pruned fairly heavily and encouraged to grow rapidly for the first 3 years without much fruit. Leave most of the small horizontal branches untouched for later fruiting. Vigorous growing, young trees can be pruned much less or not at all and encouraged to fruit earlier with branch bending.
4. Topping a vertical branch encourages vegetative growth necessary for development of the tree and creates a bushing effect. Topping horizontal branches is done to renew fruiting wood and to thin off excessive fruit. Thinning vertical branches opens the tree to more light. Thinning horizontal branches removes fruit. Horizontal branches left uncut will bear earlier and heavier crops.
5. Upright branches generally remain vegetative and vigorous. Horizontal branches generally are more fruitful. A good combination of the two is necessary for fruiting now and in future years. Branches bent to 45° to 60° angles achieves this balance.
6. Remove diseased or broken branches. Remove suckers, water sprouts and most competing branches growing straight up into the tree. Downward bending branches (beyond 90°) eventually lose vigor and produce only a few small fruit; cut off the part hanging down.
7. New growth occurs right where you make the cut; that is, the influence of the cut only affects the buds within 1 to 8 inches of the cut surface, not 3 to 4 feet down into the tree. The more buds cut off the more vigorous the new shoots will be.
8. Sun exposed wood remains fruitful and produces the largest fruit. Shaded branches eventually stop fruiting and will never produce again without drastic topping and renewal of the entire tree. Do most of the pruning in the top of the tree so that the lower branches are exposed to sunlight.
9. Make clean cuts (within ¼") of a bud; don't leave stubs.
10. Peach, nectarine, grape, & kiwi bear on last year's shoot growth and they grow a lot, so remove at least 50% of last years' growth. For fig, olive, walnut, chestnut, pecan, almond, cherry, feijoa, persimmon, apple, pear, plum, plumcot, and apricot which bear on spurs or less vigorous shoots, remove about 20% of last years' growth. For citrus, just keep the skirts pruned up off the ground.