

Pruning Fruit Trees

The reasons for pruning fruit trees are the same as those for pruning any tree or shrub. Pruning of two-year-old whips is important to the shape, health, and productivity of the mature tree. Regular maintenance pruning to remove dead or diseased wood or wood that is growing in awkward directions is also important. But unlike pruning ornamental trees and shrubs, properly pruning fruit trees makes difference between large, annual crops of excellent fruit and spotty, intermittent crops of variable quality. And because fruit trees are encouraged to bear lots of large fruits, pruning to develop a strong branch system capable of withstanding the annual load of ripe fruit is also critical. For tips on basic pruning techniques and the best times to prune, see "Pruning Methods" and "When to Prune".

___Most fruit trees are sold as two-year-old bare-root whips, and must be pruned when planted. Cut the main stem back by about one third to a fat bud, and prune side branches until you have removed about a third of the total wood. Such severe pruning of small, newly purchased trees is always difficult for beginners, but years of experience have shown that it is beneficial and will get your tree off to a faster, healthier start.

___Prune fruit trees to allow ample sunlight to reach into the middle of the tree, otherwise fruits will not ripen properly and will lack good color. That can mean removing many more lateral branches and stems than might make the most pleasing-looking, bushy plant. Such pruning also allows for good air circulation through the crown, and that prevents disease.

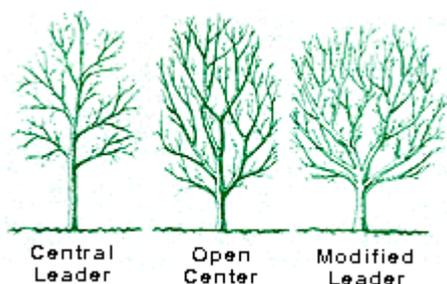


Illustration 1, There are three generally accepted systems for pruning fruit trees, each designed to produce a different configuration of main branches and secondary and lateral branches.

___**Central leader** - Apples and pears, which bear large crops of heavy fruit, should be

trained to produce most of their fruit on stubby growths between the branches called spurs. Peaches grow on one-year limb growth, and apples grow on both spurs and limbs. Spur-type trees produce less limb growth and so require less pruning, but even spurs must be thinned periodically. A spur will produce good fruit for two or three years. Then it should be removed to encourage new, more vigorous spurs.

___Try to maintain a strong central leader on young apples, switching to a modified-leader form as the trees age. Prune them lightly every year. Remove dead or damaged wood, thin branches for open growth, remove suckers and water sprouts. Moderate annual pruning is far better for the tree than irregular severe pruning. As with all fruit trees, thinning of young fruits ensures a much finer crop.



Illustration 2, maintain a strong leader, switching to a modified-leader form as the tree ages.

___Cherries need less pruning than other fruit trees. They tend toward an open-center growth habit, but it is still a good idea to encourage a central-leader habit when the tree is young, changing over to a modified-leader or open-center system.

___Peaches, nectarines, and apricots are all very vigorous and therefore need regular, careful pruning to produce well. They are also relatively short-lived (about 10 years), another reason pruning is so important, since it stimulates new, vigorous growth. Train all three to an open-central growth habit. They tend to grow tall, and the best fruit forms at the top of the tree, so prune to keep the top in bounds. Prune in late winter while the trees are dormant yet when you can remove any cold-damaged wood.

___Train a pear tree in much the same manner as an apple, with a central leader that can be allowed to form a modified leader as the tree matures. As with apples, a light annual pruning to remove dead or damaged wood and suckers

pruned to form a central leader. This system encourages the growth of strong side branches from one main trunk. Remove branches growing from the trunk to maintain open space between limbs, and also thin the secondary branches that grow from these limbs. Prune to allow sunlight and air to reach the center of the tree.

___**Modified leader** - This method begins the same as the central leader system, with one strong central trunk. Eventually though, you must prune the central leader to form several leaders. The modified leader system is generally easier to maintain because most fruit trees tend to grow in this way naturally.

___**Open center** - Also called the vase system, this method lets plenty of light and air into the center of the tree, but it also makes for weaker branches and is not recommended for apples and pears. It is well suited to quinces, crabapples, plums, cherries, peaches, nectarines, and apricots. Be sure to prune so as to avoid making lots of limbs arise from nearly the same point of the trunk, or weak crotches will result.

___A fruit tree allowed to bear all the fruit it sets in the spring will produce scads of poor-quality fruit, or it will produce well only every other year. For consistently good crops you must thin clusters of young fruit to a single fruit. Do this when the fruit is still small (marble to golf-ball size). Each fruit should be 6 inches or more from its neighbor. Such thorough fruit thinning is time-consuming, but you will appreciate the effort come fall.

and encourage spreading form is preferable to occasional heavy pruning. Thin spurs annually to keep the tree from setting too much fruit. Likewise thin young trees.

___Prune plums to an open center. Japanese plums, like peaches, require lots of pruning. Keep after them every year in late winter. European and American plums need much less pruning; an occasional thinning is all that's needed. Many plums bear heavily only every other year. To encourage good annual crops thin young fruit so that the plums are at least 5 inches apart.

___Bare-root citrus fruits trees (grapefruits, lemons, limes, and oranges) should be pruned at planting time; containerized ones probably need none. Where occasional frosts occur be sure to wait to prune until any danger of a freeze is past in the spring. And postpone fall or early-winter pruning until spring, since it can make fruit trees more cold sensitive. Citrus trees tend to grow unevenly, sending out the odd long limb. These should be pruned back to a good bud. Citrus trees lose vigor and productivity as they age, but because frigid winters are not a problem, they can withstand severe rejuvenation pruning. After such pruning be prepared to wait two or three years for good fruit production to resume.

[Back](#)