



ASK A MASTER GARDENER

PRUNING FRUIT TREES

By Elaine Applebaum, Placer County Master Gardener

Q I recently moved to a house with fruit trees. How do I prune them?

A Most fruit trees should have their heavy pruning during their dormant period, which in our area is January and February. Always use clean and well-sharpened tools.

Start by removing any damaged and diseased branches. Cut diseased branches at least 8 inches below the infected section and be sure to disinfect your saw or pruners with a 10% solution of household bleach after each cut. Remove the entire branch or cut just above an outward facing bud or branch.

The next thing to consider are the types of trees you have. Different trees bear fruit on different ages of wood. Persimmons and quince grow on new shoots formed in the current year. Peaches and nectarines grow on one-year-old branches. Heavy pruning is needed on both these types to encourage the growth of new wood. On the other hand, apples, pears, cherries and plums grow on short branches known as spurs that bear fruit for 6 to 12 years. These trees need only light pruning to allow more light and air circulation to reach the inner portions of the tree.

There are two types of pruning cuts. A heading cut shortens a long limb and encourages lateral, or side, branching. Heading cuts should be made about ¼" above an outward facing branch or dormant bud. A thinning cut removes the entire branch all the way back to where it joins a larger branch or the main trunk. This allows more light to penetrate the interior of the tree. Be sure to cut outside the branch bark ridge and branch collar (the raised area where the branch attaches), not flush to the main branch.

It is not necessary to seal cut wounds, in fact it is better not to. However, if you have exposed previously shaded areas of trunk or branches, it is recommended you paint them with a 50% water, 50% light colored interior latex paint mixture to provide protection from the sun.

It is difficult to explain pruning techniques in words. Your best bet is to attend a pruning workshop or demonstration where you can actually see where and how to make cuts. For information on current gardening workshops and demonstrations, visit the Placer County Master Gardeners website at <http://pcmg.ucanr.org>.

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