



Fruit Tree Maintenance

Proper care and maintenance of fruit trees is easy and will increase the quality and quantity of your harvests.

Pruning

Before or after the initial planting of your fruit tree, examine the tree closely. Cut back all broken branches to good wood and eliminate broken tips. Remove any branches that are crossing or parallel (side by side less than 6 inches apart). You want your tree to acquire a wine glass shape; upward curving leaders on the outside (four or five is ideal) with the middle open for light penetration.

For the first year let the tree grow into the winter. After the leaves have dropped, choose the best branches to form the wine glass shape. Select the lowest branches (1 ½ - 2 feet off the ground if possible). If branches are drooping down, cut them back to the first branch or node that is growing upward. Prune the tips of the branches as high as you can reach.

Six to eight feet is best for picking without a ladder. You can prune in the winter and any other time during the growing season. Summer pruning is fine, just remember not to remove branches with flowers or set fruit. Once the fruit is set you can cut back to the fruit for the desired tree height. Prune every year at least two to three times to keep your trees low.

A few additional tips are that branches can be manipulated with string around the outside to form the wine glass shape. Remove the string when it looks like the tree's form will hold. Apples, pears and persimmons grow from central leaders. You can terminate that leader at about 3 ½ - 4 feet and side branches will curve up to form the desired shape. If branches get too heavy under the weight of the fruit, thin by pulling off every other fruit. This will prevent broken branches.

Spraying

Stone fruit trees (peaches, nectarines, plums, apricots, and cherries) are especially susceptible to fungi, bacteria, and viruses in wet winters. Rain in the spring can also cause problems. Some of these diseases include leaf curl, shot hole, blight and brown rot. Controlling these diseases is a combination of timing and the use of a spray containing copper sulfate. It is important to spray in between winter storms at least two or three times beginning after November 15th.

You can use a small hand squeeze sprayer with the correct amount of copper and bottled water (tap water is high in alkalinity and may not work as well as purified water). Follow the directions on the copper product and you can also use a spreader, sticker additive to the mix (a few drops of dish soap works fine). Coat all the branch surfaces thoroughly. The critical time to spray is when the flower buds are full just before they open. After the buds open, it's too late to be effective. Pears and apples can be affected by fire blight. It's best to choose varieties that are resistant and spray the open flowers with copper every five days. Remove infected branches with shears washed with a light solution of bleach and water in between cutting so you don't spread the disease.

