

Post Rock Answers

By Cassie Thiessen February 20, 2025

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Fruit Tree Pruning and Care

The long winter and freezing temperatures have most of us ready for spring and the start of the gardening season. If you have the urge to work in your landscape right now, there are a few tasks that can be done before warmer weather arrives. Fruit trees can be pruned now through March as long as the wood isn't frozen. Here are some general recommendations on pruning fruit trees and instructions for each specific tree you might have.

Start by assessing your tree, then follow these pruning steps. Take out broken, damaged or diseased branches. If two branches form a narrow angle, prune one out. Narrow angles are weak angles and tend to break during wind or ice storms. Take out all suckers, suckers are branches that grow straight up. They may originate from the trunk or from major branches. If two branches cross and rub against one another, one should be taken out. Cut back or remove branches that are so low they interfere with harvest or pruning. If you cut back a branch, always cut back to another branch or a bud, don't leave a stub. Cut back branches to reduce the total size of the tree, if necessary. Thin branches on the interior of the tree. Follow these steps in order but prune no more than 30% of the tree.

If you have a peach or nectarine tree, they require more pruning than any other fruit trees because they bear fruit on growth from the previous year. Not pruning results in fruit being produced further and further from the center of the tree, allowing a heavy fruit crop to break major branches due to the weight of the fruit. Prune long branches back to a shorter side branch.

Apples tend to become overgrown if not pruned regularly. Wind storms and ice storms are then more likely to cause damage. Also, trees that are not pruned often become biennial bearers. In other words, they bear a huge crop one year and none the next. Biennial bearing is caused by too much fruit on the tree. Though pruning helps, fruit often needs to be thinned as well. The goal is to get an apple about every 4 inches. Spacing can vary as long as the average is about every 4 inches.

For cherry, pear, and plum trees a light pruning is usually all that is needed. Simply remove branches that are causing or will cause a problem according to the general recommendations above.

If you have young fruit trees, they should be pruned to begin developing a strong structure of the main or scaffold limbs. This will help prevent limb breakage over the years when the scaffolds carry a heavy fruit load. Apple, apricot, cherry, plum and pear trees generally are trained using the central leader system. The growth pattern for these trees is for a center branch to be dominant and to grow straight up. Peach and nectarine trees are normally pruned using the open center method because they do not have a strong tendency for one shoot or branch to dominate the growth of other shoots or branches. In this system, the tree is pruned to a vase-like pattern with no central leader.

Regardless of the system used, the three to four scaffold branches should be no lower than 18 inches from the ground. This makes it easier to prune and harvest the tree once it matures. Form wide angles (about 60 to 80 degrees) with the trunk. Wide angles are much stronger than narrow angles and are less likely to break under wind or ice loads. They should be distributed on different sides of the tree for good balance. It's best if they are spaced about 6 to 10 inches apart on the trunk with no branch directly opposite or below another.

Get a jump start on spring by taking care of your fruit trees now. Post Rock Extension offers several publications and resources on fruit trees. If you have any questions about caring for trees, please contact your local Extension Office.

Post Rock Extension District of K-State Research and Extension serves Jewell, Lincoln, Mitchell, Osborne, and Smith counties. Cassie may be contacted at cchiessen@ksu.edu or by calling Beloit (785-738-3597).