

Winter Fruit Tree Pruning Workshop
Saturday, January 9, 2016 San Diego Horticultural Society

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Pruning is a function of training trees. Like kids, young trees greatly benefit from training so that they grow up strong and healthy and can meet their full genetic potential. Pruning is intended to direct the growth of the tree toward the objectives that are most important to you. These objectives will be different for every situation. Commercial orchardists will have a different approach from the typical backyard gardener. Backyard Orchard Culture combines those approaches. I prefer a balance that gives equal value to fruit production and aesthetics.

Winter Pruning Objectives

Winter pruning of deciduous fruit trees focuses mainly on creating good structure. [The point of summer pruning is to keep your trees to a manageable size.]

WHY?

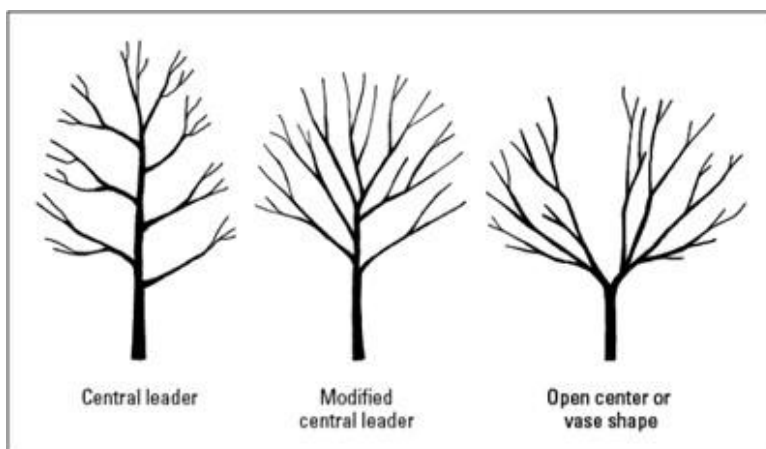
- Well-pruned trees live longer and produce more and better fruit
- Decrease pest and disease problems as well as maintenance costs
- Where there are co-dominant leaders, there are likely to be branch failures
- Maximize your tree's spring display

WHEN?

The best time for winter pruning is after the leaves have dropped – **generally late December through January**. You can usually detect the bud swell by then and it helps to identify where fruit will be borne so you can make the best pruning cuts.

WHAT?

1. Decide on the appropriate pruning model for your purposes – see diagram below
2. By year 3, remove lower scaffold branches that are no longer desirable
3. Remove broken or diseased limbs (if diseased, disinfect your tools before continuing to a new branch)
4. Remove crossing or poorly spaced branches
5. If you did not summer prune, **cut back new growth by 50%** or more for peaches and nectarines, 20% for plums, apricots and cherries, others as needed, i.e., apples, persimmons, figs
6. Use **Thinning Cuts** to remove an entire branch or **Heading Cuts** to shorten desirable branches
7. Clean up all debris: leaves, branches and mummified fruit



HOW?

Thinning cuts: using sharp pruners, loppers or saw as appropriate, remove branch without tearing bark, preserve branch collar, stub should be < 1/2"

Heading Cuts: remove 1/3 to 1/2 of branch just above outward facing bud

Prune for Health

1. Remove damaged, diseased or dead branches
2. Remove crossing branches –increases light and air circulation, reduces insects and disease

Prune for Structure

1. Branches nicely spaced, both vertically and radially
2. Remove co-dominant leaders
3. Widen crotch angles where necessary by tying or by removing branch

Prune for Fruit Production

It's important to know where the fruit and flowers are going to be produced and this varies from one type of tree to another. Trees in the *Prunus* genus - almond, apricot, cherry, nectarine, peach and plum – do well with an open vase shape, where the center of the tree is removed, much like hybrid tea roses are pruned. The main branches should spiral around the trunk. Almost all other fruit trees do best with the central leader or modified central leader shape.

Current Season Shoots	Previous Season Spurs & Shoots	Previous Season Shoots	Long Lived Spurs
Avocado	Avocado	Apple – some fruit	Almond
Citrus - most	Fig – 1 st crop	Cherry	Apple
Fig – 2 nd crop	Nectarine	Pear	Apricot
Persimmon	Olive	Pomegranate	Aprium
Loquat	Peach		Cherry
Subtropicals - many			Pear
			Plum
			Pluot
			Pomegranate

MISC Notes

Some orchardists recommend whitewash for tree trunks that are newly exposed to hot sun after pruning – If this seems like a good idea for your particular trees, use 50/50 white latex paint and water. Not usually needed unless the canopy was very dense to start with.

Another recommendation is to prune apricots and cherries only in the summer so that they have at least six weeks of dry weather after being pruned to prevent disease. I have regularly pruned apricots in winter with no problems.

This year might be different!

Remember to use dormant spray on your peaches, nectarines and NectaPlums and other peach-type hybrids in December and January. Along with good hygiene (cleaning up leaf drop and removing mummified fruit) this prevents peach leaf curl.

Important note about tree selection: Be sure you have planted fruit trees that are proven to perform in your climate zone. Lots of big box garden centers and nurseries sell trees that have little chance of success anywhere in San Diego County, yet people buy them because they are familiar with the variety from the grocery store. Check a trusted web site and Sunset Western Garden Book before you plant. There is usually some wiggle room and you can improve your success rate by using your yard's microclimates. Plant heat lovers close to the house or heat-retaining walls and cold lovers at the bottom of slopes where cold air drains or other unsheltered areas.

Pruning Worksheet for Your Home Orchard

If you are doing topiary, bonsai or espalier, obviously the pruning is focused on achieving those ends. Otherwise, vigorous fruit trees may also benefit from **summer pruning** to maintain manageable sizes. This is a key component of **Backyard Orchard Culture**, which emphasizes successive harvesting for year-round fruit and dense planting to optimize available space. It's also safer to have fruit that's easy to pick. Use the following to plan and track your pruning:

Type of Tree: Deciduous – regular pruning. Evergreen – occasional pruning

Age of Tree: Bare Root, Young Tree, Established, Long-Neglected (don't do it all at once)

Structure/Shape Objectives: Central leader, Modified Central Leader, Open Center. Desirable Crotch Angles- 40° to 60° is ideal, Remove suckers and STAY OFF LADDERS!

Technique: Thinning cuts: saw cut to remove entire branch (under, over, off) larger than you can hold in your hand – avoid tears - always keep the branch collar intact, don't leave a stub

Heading cuts: Pruners and loppers – keep sharp, replace blades, avoid tearing bark, cut just above outward facing bud

Tools: Heavy duty gloves, Bypass pruners, Lopper, Pole saw, Pruning saw

Type of Tree	Age	Fruiting Wood	Objective	Misc Notes: Planting, Pruning, Spraying Dates
Ex: 'Katy' Apricot	Established	Spurs	Fruit	
Ex: 'Pink Lady' Apple	Bare root	Spurs	Structure	
Ex: 'Fuji' Apple	Young	Spurs	Structure	
Ex: 'Arctic Star' Nectarine	Neglected Older Tree	Previous season shoots/spurs	Size control	

Sources & Resources

Thanks are due to the many arborists and experts whose advice is incorporated here. They include Stephen Holcomb, Tom Del Hotal, Robin Rivet, Pat Welsh, Tom Spellman, Dr. Ed Gilman and Brian Kempf. See these websites for lots more, including instructional videos: Dave Wilson Nursery, San Diego Master Gardeners, International Society of Arboriculture, California Rare Fruit Growers, UC Agriculture & Natural Resources

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