

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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Why prune fruit trees? This is a common question. Perhaps an understanding of the ‘why’ will lead to the knowledge of ‘how’.

First, pruning branches stimulates shoot growth. Shoot growth is essential to produce the tissue that will do the fruiting; in the case of apples, pears, plums and cherries, it is the spurs – those short, pointed little branches that form along the secondary branches. Encouraging spurs to form helps to foster the future production of fruit.

A second reason for pruning is to reduce the overall size of a tree. This is especially important with the larger, full-sized trees. To prevent them from getting too big and impossible to deal with, it is a good idea to start early in their life and keep them cut back. Who wants to climb 30 feet into trees to harvest fruit? It is too dangerous. In addition, heading back and pruning old trees that have gotten too large should make them more manageable for you.

Pruning makes the trees easier to cover with sprays to reduce disease and insect damage. If your trees are too large or thickly canopied, it is impossible to get through coverage of all leaf, fruit and branch surfaces.

Young trees need to be pruned to improve their structural strength and to induce branching. Selecting the best branches to leave and those to remove when the tree is just planted, and for the first several years of its life, is quite important. Branches should be evenly spaced up and down the trunk and should be growing with wide angles from their points of origin.

A priority should be removing weak and crossing branches as well as those growing inwards toward the center. This is generally all that’s needed at planting. Next summer and in subsequent dormant seasons, heading back may be necessary. Always prune back to a bud facing in the direction you wish the growth to continue. Don’t leave unsightly stubs; cut to the origin of the branch.

Fruit production and quality will be improved if a whole lot of unnecessary branches are eliminated. Prune to allow more sunlight to penetrate the canopy; you will get bigger and sweeter fruit. This will also eliminate the tendency for over-fruiting, which causes fruit to be abundant, but too small.

New trees will only need light pruning after they are established and for the first several years thereafter. Do not remove more than about one third of the potential leaf issue, or the tree will not be able to make the food necessary for re-establishment and good initial growth.

Mature trees that are showing too little growth should be pruned during the season. Heavy pruning will stimulate better growth. The tops should be pruned more heavily than the bottoms.

February is an ideal time to do the type of dormant pruning necessary for good tree maintenance; in any case, all pruning should be accomplished before growth starts in spring.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.