

February is Fruit Tree Pruning Time

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Fruit trees should be pruned every year. It doesn't matter if they had a fruit crop last year or if you think they are going to have a fruit crop this year, they should be pruned every year. If you practice annual pruning the amount of pruning you do each year shouldn't be too bad. But sadly, most home orchardists don't prune every year and all of sudden the job seems overwhelming. Or the trees were planted too deep so that they rooted out above the graft which negated the dwarfing rootstock. Then, instead of pruning a dwarf apple tree, you are pruning a full sized apple tree.

Fruit trees are best pruned in mid to late winter. At this time buds, both leaf and flower, haven't started to swell very much yet. Once the buds start to swell they become far easier to break off if you brush up against them so you can lose valuable blossom buds. You can prune anytime, but for personal comfort and to reduce the risk of damage to the tree we recommend not pruning when the temperature is below freezing. You can prune clear up into the bloom season, but again, you can end up with a lot of blossoms getting damaged that won't be able to produce fruit and, the wood starts getting heavier as it starts moving sap and developing leaves!

We prune for a few basic reasons. First of all we want to control size. This then limits the number of fruit that the tree might produce which means we have fewer fruit but bigger fruit. We also want to keep as much of the fruiting wood as possible as close to major limbs so that we have good support. We want to eliminate non-productive water sprouts from the base of the tree. We want to keep lower branches pruned up so that we can mow under the tree more easily. We want to remove branches that cross over each other and cause rubbing injury. We want to prune to open up the center of the tree to allow more sunlight to reach more leaves. We also want to open up the tree to allow better penetration of sprays if we need to apply fungicides and insecticides.

A few paragraphs in this column aren't adequate to cover the intricacies of fruit tree pruning. You need to spend some time learning where the tree blooms and bears fruit. On peaches it's two year old wood; on apples and pears it's usually on short spurs that are several years old. If you aren't sure, just wait and watch it this year.

The first steps in pruning are straightforward. Cut off the water sprouts or suckers that seem to develop at the base of the tree. These take valuable resources that don't go to fruit. Cut out branches that are crossing each other and rubbing or that are trying to grow in the same space. Cut the tree down to a size that you can reach with your sprayer or your ladder. Start to open up the center of the tree for better light penetration. If your tree is severely over grown you'll need to get it back into shape over several years. You never want to remove more than one third of the total wood from a tree in any one year.

Pruning needs to start the year that a fruit tree is planted. The sooner you start the fewer problems you have to correct later. We have a good bulletin at the Extension Office that goes into good detail on fruit tree pruning. The K-State Research and Extension website also has a couple of videos on fruit tree pruning and grape pruning. If you have questions on fruit tree pruning or care, please give me a call at the Geary County Extension Office, 785-238-4161.