

Pruning Fruit Trees: Start 'Em Young!

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

The most common mistake that home gardeners make with fruit trees, is that they don't start pruning them soon enough in their life cycle. Many gardeners plant a fruit tree thinking that they don't have to worry about it for several years. Then it's ten years later, it's a mess and they have to move into recovery mode to try to fix, or live with, structural issues. When in reality, they could have started from year one taking care of correcting those potential future issues before they happen!

The ideal situation is that you develop a tree, talking about grafted dwarf trees here, that has 3 or 4 "scaffold" branches. These are branches that come off the main trunk. I like to think of them as supports on a spiral staircase. You want these scaffolds to be attached at 60 to 80 degree angles to the main trunk, be distributed on different sides of the tree for balance, and be spaced six to ten inches apart on the trunk with no branches directly opposite or below another scaffold. These scaffolds will become the key branches that you develop the fruit bearing branches to grow from. This is often called a central leader method of pruning and is used for just about all fruit trees except peach.

With small new trees you may only have two or three scaffolds for the first few years, but within a few years you want to try to develop additional scaffolds up to the four that you eventually want. If you order fruit trees over the internet or mail order, you will usually get a single unbranched whip to plant. If the whip is more than three feet tall, cut it back to 30 to 36 inches. This will force the buds below to start to develop shoots or branches that will be trained into the scaffolds. When you start selecting scaffold branches, make sure that the lowest branches aren't too low or they will be a headache in coming years.

If you buy a larger tree at a nursery, then it will likely already have some branching developed. But those branches may not be the ones that you want to keep in the long run. Get the tree planted and then evaluate the branching. Pick out the branches you want to keep and cut the others back to the trunk, just outside the bark ridge collar. In successive years, as you develop any additional scaffolds, always try to keep the scaffolds pruned to the same length. In other words, don't have a pyramidal tree, try to keep it "square".

One problem that we sometimes have is that young scaffolds come off the central leader at angles sharper than 45 degrees. We can spread those out using sticks that we'll call spreaders. These are 3/4 inch square boards cut to the proper length to wedge into the tree and carefully, don't split the branches at the point of attachment, increase the angle of attachment. You can help keep those sticks in place by using a four penny nail driven into the ends of the spreaders, then the heads cut off at an angle about 1/4 inch long and these are pushed into the branches. Usually after one or two years these spreaders can be removed.

One last thought about planting fruit trees. Most fruit trees today are dwarf trees and they are grafted. The graft should be a very obvious knot, or large bump, on the lower trunk of the tree. When you plant the tree in your fruit garden it is very important that this graft stays well above ground level. If you plant the tree too deep, and the graft comes into contact with the soil, it is likely to develop roots above the graft. The rootstock is what keeps the tree dwarfed. If roots develop above the graft the new roots will overwhelm the dwarfing rootstock and you will end up with a full size tree!