

Time to Start Pruning Fruit Trees

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

When we hit the middle of February, and we start to get those occasional warm days, it's time to start pruning fruit trees. Far too many homeowners think that if they plant a dwarf fruit tree it means that they don't have to prune it. Which is not correct. Fruit trees require a certain amount of maintenance regardless of what species or type (standard, dwarf, or semi-dwarf) you plant.

Tree size is controlled in part by the type of rootstock that the tree is grafted onto (and virtually all fruit trees are grafted) and how it is managed, which is to say, pruned. If a homeowner isn't careful when they plant their fruit tree, and plant it too deeply so that the graft is at ground level, the tree will root above the graft and you then have a full size tree. Dwarfing root stocks keep the tree small, but also have a significantly smaller root system. This can lead to problems of stability when these trees try to deal with Kansas winds. Semi-dwarf trees are probably a better fit for our Kansas conditions.

Fruit trees are pruned to help control size, to improve structure and strength, to remove damaged or unnecessary branches, to improve light penetration to the leaves, to control the amount of fruit produced, and to make it easier to spray the tree if you do spray. Cherry, pear and plum trees need the least amount of pruning. Peach (and nectarine) need the most pruning and apple trees will tend to get overgrown if not regularly pruned.

In all trees you want to removed broken, damaged or diseased branches. You want to remove, early on, branches with narrow angles of attachment as these are weak and prone to breaking out. You want to take out sucker sprouts, which are branches that grow rapidly and tend to go straight up from the trunk or major branches.

You want to remove a branch that is rubbing against another branch. Obviously cut back branches that are so close to the ground that they make it difficult to harvest or mow around the tree. You often want to cut back branches so you don't have fruit growing on long weak branches. You want to thin out interior branches to facilitate light penetration and making it easier to spray. It is also important to start pruning a new fruit tree the year after you plant it to start helping it form a good sound structure. Waiting several years before doing anything usually results in a tangled and confusing mess!

Peach trees bloom on one year old wood. New wood that was produced last year will bloom this year, if the blooms don't get frozen. Regular pruning is necessary to encourage the peach tree to keep producing new growth every year. Prune long branches back to a shorter side branch. This will keep new growth close to larger branches that can support the weight of the fruit.

Apple trees that aren't pruned regularly tend to produce a lot of blossoms one year which then produce lots of little apples. Because of the heavy fruit load one year, the hardly blooms at all the next year. Pruning annually will help balance out this biennial bearing. A tree will try to produce as many apples as possible. But there is an inverse relationship between number of fruit and size of fruit. Aim for fewer, but larger, fruit.

We have a good bulletin at the Extension Office on pruning fruit trees. There will also be a fruit tree pruning demonstration on Saturday, February 24th starting at 10:30 a.m. at 6611 Lyon Creek Rd, south of Junction City.