

# You Have to Prune Your Fruit Trees!



As promised last month, let's continue developing our Home Orchard by discussing pruning of maturing or matured Fruit trees. The title says it all: You have to Prune Your Fruit Trees! This is where it all starts for the growing season. Regular, aggressive, annual pruning is a must to insure the ongoing vigor of your trees!

I love to prune, any plant at any time in anyway I can think of, I have no fear and neither should you! I lost my fear by learning from every cut I make and I am still learning today. The one goal I have for you is that after reading this you will prune regularly, aggressively and every year, without fear and with growing confidence. Before we get into the "how"... just a moment on with "what." Spend the money on a good pair of hand pruners, they are worth every penny. I prefer 'Felco' brand hand pruners, not readily available in many stores and beware of lesser made copy cats. I still have my same pair I have used for years and simply clean the tool and change the blade easily.

All pruning should have goals and for fruit trees proper pruning can prevent too many fruit, increase fruit size and help control pests of all kinds. Pruning also will develop the desired shape and form that allows for easy picking and will keep your trees behaved and not overgrown. Pruning should be completed each year, when you skip a season the decisions become more difficult as well as the work!

Apples, Pears, Cherries and some Plums are upright growers and form central leaders. Generally these trees can be pruned in late winter or early spring (NOW), although many orchard growers may prefer to prune Cherries only when in leaf, this has proven to reduce pest problems. The goal with an upright growing tree is to develop three or four groups of branches along the leader that will become the main sources of fruit. With these pyramidal growers, I prefer to prune the main leader every year by about 1/3 to keep my apples where I can get them.

Apricots, Nectarines, some Cherries and Peaches tend to be more spreading growers and generally prefer to be pruned in early spring (NOW) as opposed to late winter. With a spreading form your goal is to maintain the four or five dominant branches in an arching form. Allowing too many of these spreading branches on any fruit will lead to weak branching unable to withstand the weight of the fruit.

# *You Have to Prune Your Fruit Trees! cont'd*

On most trees your goal with each annual prune is to remove much of last year's unwanted growth and suckers building strength in the remaining branches and structure of the tree. We always have to keep in mind our fruit trees will be producing for years to come and every pruning choice you make should support long term success. I understand pruning is difficult and reality is there are no simple instructions for pruning that I can easily communicate in words without performing the action. Consider visiting your local orchard and looking closely at the pruning method they apply, much can be learned by simply looking closely at an existing tree and applying the above. You can also visit your local garden center, a real one with real professionals. Many hold demonstrations through out the year on home orchards.

Pollination, we won't spend too much time on this, a few things to remember and then this becomes a non issue. First of all Peaches, Nectarines and Apricots are all self-pollinating and require no additional help in developing fruit, as are Stella Cherries and North Star Sour Cherry.

Most Apples, Pears, Plums and Sweet & Sour cherries are not self-pollinating. This simply means flowers may be sterile and there are different levels of sterility. To overcome this it is recommended that trees in this group are planted within 50' of another variety of the same fruiting tree. And naturally the closer the better for the bees.

My advice on this is pretty simple, when you plant a Fruit Tree, choose two varieties you like and plant both. Again, your local garden center professional can walk you through this easily and it is not nearly as scary as it may sound.

I encourage you to get started today on your own orchard, nothing is more rewarding than growing your own!

*-Don Eaton  
Pennsylvania Pride Grow Team*

