



How to Prune Fruit Trees: Pruning Made Easy!

ZSUZSY BEE • FEB 25, 2022

Zsuzsy has been an online writer for many years. Her articles often focus on DIY home projects and delicious recipes.

Peach, Pear, Cherry, Plum. . . Do You Have to Prune for Fruit?

First of all, fruit trees do not need to be pruned to produce fruit. The fruit production of a tree is a natural occurrence that ensures the tree's survival. That means a gardener may choose not to prune. However, pruning can produce better fruit. . . I explain how below.

Why should I prune a fruit tree?

Why prune fruit trees at all? Unpruned trees, especially young ones, will grow branches galore and push out blooms each year. These, in turn, will become fruit. The more each bloom has to compete, the smaller the fruit will be. Too many blooms and fruits competing for nutrition from the tree can be a burden and eventually cause damage to the tree.

If you prune, the tree will send all its nutrition to the remaining sturdy branches that will be strong enough to support the bounty of heavy, large fruit, and the fruit will taste better.

If you don't prune, the tree will sprout many thin little branchlets that could eventually carry fruit, but fruit that's smaller, inferior in taste, and may weigh the branches down or even break them.

So, the reason to prune a fruit tree is to have healthy, strong trees that will successfully produce great fruit crops for many years to come.

The Pruning Process

We also have to understand that the pruning process reduces the total size of the tree and its fruit production. The food-manufacturing mechanism of a tree is located among its leaves. Cutting away some of the branches means that the food production or output of the "factory" will be reduced. This, in turn, will also reduce the bearing area of a tree, thus reducing the stature and production ability of the tree. Any cut to a living organism's 'body' needs time to heal and will divert the tree's energy from its growth.

When Is the Best Time to Prune a Fruit Tree?

The best time to prune a fruit tree is in late winter or early spring while the tree is still dormant and before new growth begins. The pruning wounds also heal the best at this time and it's also easier to see the buds to work around them. As the tree is dormant (not pumping sap up from the roots), the cut wounds have a chance to dry up with the help of the cold and the wind. Another benefit to pruning then is the absence of insects that could cause damage.

Pruning stimulates new growth, so this is why it's best to catch the tree just at the end of winter before the spring growth, a time when tree growth is natural. If a tree is pruned when it's dealing with the heat of summer or during the fall when it is preparing for dormancy, the tree will be unnecessarily stressed.

The only exception to this rule is when branches are dead, diseased, or damaged: These branches should be cut as soon as possible to protect the tree.

The Best Pruning Tools

I'm a tool fanatic. Over the years, I have learned that there is a tool for every job, and tree pruning is not an exception. There is a large assortment of pruning tool available on the market, so it will take time for you to find which tool will work the best for you. Whether or not you want to invest mega bucks into power tools really depends on the size of your "orchard." For me, pruning just two trees every year didn't warrant buying a chainsaw (sorry, guys). For most jobs, hand tools such as clippers, shears, saws, and pole pruners will do just fine.

The ideal pruning shears or hand clippers is lightweight and makes clean cuts that can heal quickly. I own a couple of different sized ones and I carry one with me all the time when in the garden. That way, I'm able to snip off any suckers right away when I notice them. Personal preference will determine which kind of shears best fit your hands. Long-handled lopping shears will give extra leverage for reaching taller and thicker branches. Tree pruners (clippers mounted onto a pole and activated by a rope) also come in handy for cutting those really high branches. And for larger tree limbs, you will need a pruning saw which also comes in a variety of styles, from curved to straight-bladed, etc.

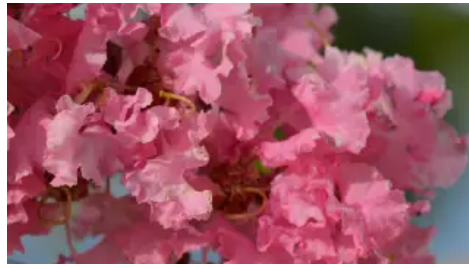
Maintenance of tools: To keep flat blades sharp, use a whetstone or grindstone. Clippers need a drop of motor oil to keep them working smoothly. Unless you know the exact degree of the saw teeth, it's best to get the saw sharpened by a professional. For over-winter storage, keep all your gardening and pruning tools clean, well-oiled, and dry.

Scroll to Continue

Read More From Dengarden



How to Grow Fig Trees in Containers



Proper Pruning of Crepe Myrtles



39 Small Trees (Under 30 Feet) for a Small Yard or Garden

Note!

A good rule of thumb that I learned from my Gramps is that any branch that is thicker than an inch in diameter needs to be cut with a saw.

Terms to Know

Arms: The main branches or extensions of the trunk.

Bearing tree: A fruit tree that has reached the age where it's producing blossoms and fruit.

Bud: A slightly enlarged node from which flowers, leaves, or shoots grow.

Central leader: A type of pruning where the grower chooses one single strong trunk from which all side branches are allowed to grow.

Disbud: The selective removal of flower buds or young shoots so that the remaining buds can grow bigger.

Dormant: Vegetation that is resting and not growing for a period of time (usually, the winter season).

Fruiting wood: Shoots or branches that have the potential to bear the current year's crop.

Head: The part of the trunk above the first branches or arms.

Heading back: Cutting a portion of the head growth, usually to control the height of the tree.

Internode: The portion of a branch between two nodes.

Laterals: The side branches of a shoot.

Node: The joint on a shoot where buds and leaves emerge.

Pinching: The removal of the growing tip of a shoot by pinching between thumb and finger.

Pruning: The removal of excess parts above ground.

Renewal spur: A spur that produces shoots for next year's fruiting.

Shoots: The new growth that develops from buds during the growing season.

Spur: A short, thick growth that produces flowers on apple, pear, and cherry trees.

Stone fruit: Fruit that has a single seed inside it. Plums, peaches, apricots, and cherries are most commonly known as stone fruit.

Suckers: Vigorous new shoots growing from below the surface of the ground from the rootstock.

Terminal bud: The bud at the end of a branch that extends the growth of the tree.

Thinning: The removal of branches, flower clusters, immature fruit clusters, or their parts.

Training: The direction or form given to a young vine as it grows, usually by attaching it to a mechanical support.

Trunk: The main woody stem of a tree (as opposed to its roots or branches).

Vigor: The rate of growth.

Watersprouts: Vigorous shoots that grow from buds, usually on the trunk or older branches.

What Parts to Cut Away

a: Chop off suckers that originate from below ground.

b: Chop off low-growing branchlets.

c: Chop off branchlets that want to compete with the dominant central trunk or leader.

d: Chop off branchlets that grow inward or rub against the trunk or other branches.

To keep a tree healthy and productive, these above-mentioned sections are the most important to trim off, even though it might feel like a shame to prune off healthy and good looking new growth. To do the job right, it's important to know when to cut, what to cut, how much to cut, and how to do the cutting.

a: This cut is the correct placement and angle of cutting: 1/4 inch above a bud at a 45° angle.

b: This cut leaves too much exposed cut surface, which will give diseases more opportunity to attack the tree.

c: This cut is too close to the bud. Buds are fragile and can easily be damaged which, in turn, can make that area on the tree non-growing and non-productive.

d: This cut is too far away from the bud and leaves too much of a stub which will die and rot, thus leaving an opportunity for diseases to enter the branch.

The main objective when pruning is to make clean cuts without leaving any stubs. A stub will rot and make the branch vulnerable to infections that eventually can spread throughout the rest of the tree.

As in the drawings either cut close to the main branch or just above the bud.

When to Leave the Bud, When to Cut It

When cutting, make the cut just above a bud that grows in the direction in which you want the new growth to grow. (This tip will come in handy and is especially important to remember when pruning an espaliered tree.)

A bud on the outside of the branch will grow out (which is preferable); one on the inside will grow in towards the center of the tree (which usually is not a desired direction except, again, on an espaliered tree). If the bud will grow in an undesired direction, then cut it off.

How to Prune a Tree

Always work with the larger branches first then work your way down to the finer cuts.

1. Choose the right tool for the job and always cut at a 45° angle.
2. First, remove dead, broken, or diseased limbs.

3. Next, remove the suckers, water sprouts, and crossing limbs.
4. Next, remove all other growth that won't let the air circulate within the tree (once in full foliage).
5. Finally, remove all the growth that appears to be crowding the other well-established branches.

Pruning Larger Limbs and Branches

When cutting larger limbs, there is always a danger of the weight of the limb splitting before it is completely neatly and cleanly cut. Split damage can leave the woody parts without bark and unprotected. Use this three step method to prevent damage.

3 Step Method for Cutting Large Branches to Prevent Damage:

1. Make a cut, sawing from the bottom up, about a third of the way through the branch, 18-20 inches away from the tree trunk.
2. Make the second cut from the top down, 2-4 inches further out on the branch, this time cutting all the way through.
3. Now you can cut the remaining stub almost flush and parallel to the tree trunk. This ensures that the tree bark won't loosen up near the wound and allow for moisture and bugs to enter between the bark and the woody parts.

Should I Use a Pruning Sealer to Dress the Wound?

The main reason for using the protective goo is to keep moisture and bugs out. With it, healing is much accelerated. It is said that only cuts that are over 2 inches in diameter need to have a protective wound dressing applied. I disagree, and I cover all cuts with a bit of dressing. The ants and bugs in my neighborhood are not picky, and I'm almost positive they have not spent the time to read that section of the manual.

The protective goo that I bought about 3-4 years ago, a commercial tree-paint preparation which contains an antiseptic, came in a 2 pound tub and cost less than 10 bucks. Even if I keep covering every wound and cut of the trees around me, I think I should have enough for the next five years. I give larger cuts a repainting every fall and spring.

How Often Should a Fruit Tree Be Pruned?

- **When first planted**, a young fruit tree should have a severe pruning, all the way down to a mere whip.

- **The second and third year**, very little pruning needs to be done. Only cut off the occasional sucker coming up from the root system and do what you must to bring it into the 'head shape' wanted. It's important to prevent bad crotches from happening, to keep a strong central leader, and to make sure the tree doesn't become too heady (too wide) or too leggy (too thin and tall). Warning: Over-pruning at this time will delay fruiting.
- **After the tree begins to bear fruit**, more pruning will be needed so that the branches stay well balanced around the whole trunk. Cutting back and thinning out the lateral branches will produce the best fruit.

This article is accurate and true to the best of the author's knowledge. Content is for informational or entertainment purposes only and does not substitute for personal counsel or professional advice in business, financial, legal, or technical matters.

Questions & Answers

Question: What did you use on the cut wound?

Answer: Using a pruning sealer can actually obstruct trees' natural healing power. Tree pruning sealers are bad for your trees because they make it harder for your tree to heal as they trap in moisture which can then encourage wood decay or fungi.

If you're adamant on using a pruning compound, buy it from a reputable garden center and read the contents before using. Also, only apply a very thin coat.

Comments

Mildred on October 11, 2017:

A great article, thanks gf!

Zsuzsy Bee (author) from Ontario/Canada on March 31, 2012:

I doubt that anything will fix a tree if it's been damaged that badly

zs

Beth on March 30, 2012:

No, I haven't done anything with the walnut tree....they stripped the tree as high as they could reach, and they are over 6 ft tall (the boys). I'm pretty sure it's a goner. Hopefully we can have something when (if) they move out. lol

Zsuzsy Bee (author) from Ontario/Canada on March 28, 2012:

Beth, it is a heart break when you've been waiting for a tree to mature. Happens to all of us at one time or another. Have you tried to paint on some tar paint onto the walnut? Maybe you can still save it if it hasn't been too long and hasn't dried out too much...

good luck

regards Zsuzsy

Beth on March 27, 2012:

Thanks,I will do that. I was also told that they dont need a pollinator,then I was told they do. Was so looking forward to granny smiths. We bought the tree 3 yrs ago. Our Black walnut tree also bit the dust. Its an old one too. Kids(old enough to know better) ripped the bark off. GRR

Zsuzsy Bee (author) from Ontario/Canada on March 26, 2012:

Beth, thanks for taking a look and for commenting. Sorry it took so long to reply I was away. As for your granny smith... well... I haven't had much luck with suckers groing any amount of fruit. If I were you I would invest in another tree but leave the old one also for a couple of years to see what it does as I'm always reluctant to cut out anything still alive. It might just have a really good root system that will supply the suckers with the right nutrients to actually become a bearing "tree".

regards Zsuzsy

Beth on March 23, 2012:

My Granny Smith apple tree is dead,but there are suckers that are alive and well,and look great. Should I cut the main tree down,and allow the suckers to grow?

Zsuzsy Bee (author) from Ontario/Canada on January 13, 2012:

Naseer, thank you for taking a look and for commenting

regards Zsuzsy

Naseer Ahmad on January 08, 2012:

I really like the information regarding pruning it was useful for me i am horticulturist some time I am facing with problem, your information will help me allot in the future

regards Naseer Kabul, Afghanistan

Zsuzsy Bee (author) from Ontario/Canada on September 19, 2011:

pacrapacma, from the sounds of it you really gave your cherry tree the shock of its life... (pruning down to half it's original size and attacking its rooting system too) will probably take a year or two to recoup. As for when to prune the new shoots... well after that big ordeal that it went through you should probably cut as little as possible, just the tips of the new growths. My personal preference is to prune early early spring (but that is just me) I feel trees lose the least amount of sap that way...

good luck

regards Zsuzsy

pacrapacma on September 13, 2011:

I see that you suggest trimming in early spring. This past Spring my husband gave our cherry tree a huge pruning. Our tree was about 20ft tall and 20ft wide. He reduced it to about half. We also put in an egress window next to the tree, so the roots were cut on one side also. The tree produced about one small bowl of cherries this year.

The tree has a lot of new growth. I have two questions for you. When should I cut off the new shoots? Fall or Spring? Should I cut off all the new growth or leave a percentage of it? My husband did leave a few smaller old growth branches that will have leaves. Thanks for all the great info in this Hub.

quester.ltd on March 20, 2011:

Thanks Zsuzsy - I'm not expecting much if any crop of apples this year - just wanted to save the tree more than anything.

Thanks for the comment on the wolves

q

Zsuzsy Bee (author) from Ontario/Canada on March 20, 2011:

quester.ltd (love the avatar) thanks for taking a look and for commenting. Glad you were on the right track, it can take a growing season or two before you realize that you've done something wrong. The first trees (an old orchard that was on the farm) I pruned on my own took a year to recoup as I had cut them down too much... (very few apples that first fall but eventually it turned all for the good because the apples grew really huge the third year and plentiful too.

regards Zsuzsy

quester.ltd on March 20, 2011:

Zsuzsy Bee - Thanks for the tips - we had followed your instructions before I found them so I glad to know we were on the right track.

Good information Thanks

Zsuzsy Bee (author) from Ontario/Canada on February 17, 2011:

Hiya Terri, thanks for taking a look and for commenting. Pruning can be a big job but it helps pass the time until spring.

Hope you're well

regards Zsuzsy

Terri Paajanen on February 17, 2011:

Fantastic information. I'm about to embark on some fruit trees and will keep this on hand to help them thrive.

Zsuzsy Bee (author) from Ontario/Canada on January 30, 2011:

Linda neglected trees are always a challenge mainly because most of us do not want to take the pruning down to as much as we should the first time but even a partial pruning will benefit the trees a lot. Thanks for the visit.

Good luck

regards Zsuzsy

Zsuzsy Bee (author) from Ontario/Canada on January 30, 2011:

Dave I'm glad I was able to help a bit. Thank you for reading and for commenting.

regards Zsuzsy

Dave Pinkney from United Kingdom on January 29, 2011:

And I thought I knew everything about pruning fruit trees, but I've just learned a little more. Many thanks.

Zsuzsy Bee (author) from Ontario/Canada on February 05, 2010:

George, thank you for taking a look and for commenting.

kindest regards Zsuzsy

George Machado on February 05, 2010:

Hello there yes you have a great blog here very straight forward and lots of knowledge and helpful ideas and hints.I'll come back again for sure.

Zsuzsy Bee (author) from Ontario/Canada on January 10, 2010:

ça?lar keskin thank you for taking a look and for commenting. I'll be checking out the link you gave, thanks for that too

regards Zsuzsy

Zsuzsy Bee (author) from Ontario/Canada on November 25, 2009:

RTalloni thanks for coming by for a visit and for commenting. Glad the hub helped.

kindest regards Zsuzsy

RTalloni on November 25, 2009:

Have been looking for good clear instructions for pear and apple trees. This is very helpful and an interesting read! Thanks for good explanations!

Zsuzsy Bee (author) from Ontario/Canada on September 15, 2009:

Wow, 18 foot tall...I stuck with the dwarf trees that way picking is much easier.

zs

ralwus on September 15, 2009:

Good idea, thanks. I do have crabapples there already for pollinators and they are very well established and are close to 18 foot tall.

Zsuzsy Bee (author) from Ontario/Canada on September 15, 2009:

Hello Ralwus, always glad when you come for a visit. If I were you I would take a soil sample though before plopping in the fruit trees. The soil after the cedars might be a bit more acidic then they like. Coffee grinds and banana peels might just balance things out a bit.

Cherry trees are on my list for next year, hopefully.

kindest regards Zsuzsy

ralwus on September 15, 2009:

I am expert at pruning and this fall I will plant my first apple and cherry trees from where I took out a row of arborvitae along my fence line. God willing and the creek don't rise that is. Nice info.

Zsuzsy Bee (author) from Ontario/Canada on March 19, 2009:

Hi Britney thanks for taking a look. I'm getting a bit antsy to get into the garden too but it will still be another 6-7-8 weeks at least.

I got all my pruning done in Feb so now its just waiting for spring

regards Zsuzsy

britneydavidson from united kingdom on March 18, 2009:

great hub and excellent information....i am feeling like going in my garden to do gardnering...thanx for sharing it....you always come with great hubs...keep it up..thanx

Zsuzsy Bee (author) from Ontario/Canada on March 17, 2009:

Patty, yes I can hardly wait for the blossoms... everything is well and great here

kindest regards Zsuzsy

Patty English MS from USA and Asgardia, the First Space Nation on March 17, 2009:

It's time to start looking forward to blossoms and new fruit on the trees, isn't it?

Hope all is well in Canada!

Zsuzsy Bee (author) from Ontario/Canada on March 16, 2009:

CompuSmart always glad when you came for a visit, thanks for taking a look and for commenting. Sorry I was away hence the delay in my reply.

Hope you're well

regards Zsuzsy

Zsuzsy Bee (author) from Ontario/Canada on March 16, 2009:

The Real Tomato glad you came for a visit, thanks for taking a look and for commenting. I was away hence the delay in my reply

regards Zsuzsy

Zsuzsy Bee (author) from Ontario/Canada on March 16, 2009:

Fruit tree nursery thanks for taking a look and for commenting.

regards Zsuzsy

Zsuzsy Bee (author) from Ontario/Canada on March 16, 2009:

Shawna thanks for taking a look and for commenting. Best of luck with your trees.

regards Zsuzsy

Tony Sky from London UK on March 10, 2009:

Cool! Now all I need is to know how to grow them! and until then, in the words of arnie!

Ill be back!:)

The Real Tomato on March 05, 2009:

This is the best comprehensive info I have read thus far. Books or internet. The first time I pruned an apple tree I over pruned it (ouch) it took two years to recover. Anyone who has fruit trees should read this!

Awesome job!

Fruit Tree Nursery on February 23, 2009:

Wow, that is a ton of detailed info. I work at a fruit tree nursery, and we actually take pride in our pruning. We grow our trees in large 3 or 5 gallon pots to make sure the root system is strong and healthy. Then we prune them so that the tree gets more branches... more branches means more fruit!

Also, since I work at a fruit tree nursery, I've noticed that with this difficult economy, more people are taking an interest to organic gardening and growing their own fruit. Not only is it cheaper, its safer too... because

you're not buying fruit that's been sprayed with strange chemicals in some central American country.

shawna.wilson from Arizona on February 22, 2009:

Thanks for the helpful info. We planted three fruit trees last year, and I'm hoping they will produce something this summer. The idea of pruning them has always scared me! I don't want to cut too much off and ruin the tree. I'll refer to this hub when I get the courage to start trimming :)

Zsuzsy Bee (author) from Ontario/Canada on February 17, 2009:

Foxility! It sounds like quite a bit of work but once you're out there trimming with the promise of spring just being around the corner it is actually fun. Also knowing how gorgeous the fruit trees are when they're in full bloom and then eating the cherries, apples and pears makes it all worth it.

Glad you popped in for a visit

kindest regards Zsuzsy

Zsuzsy Bee (author) from Ontario/Canada on February 17, 2009:

Packerpack! Thanks for taking a look and for commenting.

kindest regards Zsuzsy

foxility on February 17, 2009:

I didn't know it took so much work. Great tips... thanks

Om Prakash Singh from India, Calcutta on February 14, 2009:

This is yet another off-beat topic on which we have a Hub here. I must agree you have given some very good volume and complete information. Not only have you mentioned the different ways to prune but have attached photos too which really helps understand things. A very good hub indeed. Thanks for this Hub

Zsuzsy Bee (author) from Ontario/Canada on February 13, 2009:

I tried that CGull and that monster plant just wants to be stubborn. It has one chance left this coming season if it won't behave the way a nice rose bush is supposed to it will get the ax (well after I move it... I talk rough now but I won't kill it...it will win I'm sure)

Thanks for the help regards Zsuzsy

cgull8m from North Carolina on February 13, 2009:

Zsuzsy, put some coffee grounds and banana skins in the ground around the rose bush, it also helps. I bought these rose plants from Canada, Hortico.com <http://hortico.com/>, they are the best. Cheers :)

Zsuzsy Bee (author) from Ontario/Canada on February 13, 2009:

Thanks for taking a look C.S.. I'm always glad when You pop in for a visit. Pruning and grafting trees was my Grandpas forte. He had trellised fruit trees that were amazing. One grew apricots on one side and plums on the other. Another had red apples on one side and a funny green and pink type on the other branch. Unfortunately a lot of his know-how was lost because as a stupid teenager I really didn't pay all that much attention to all his teachings.

regards Zsuzsy

C.S.Alexis from NW Indiana on February 13, 2009:

Zsuzsy,

Great work on this pruning hub. I think people often are afraid to prune or they go nuts and cut too much. This is an excellent informative hub and should be bookmarked and utilized by anyone planning to get out the pruning shears.

Zsuzsy Bee (author) from Ontario/Canada on February 12, 2009:

Thanks CGull... I haven't had much luck with my one rose bush. I keep pruning and it just doesn't want to bloom. Maybe I will dig it up and move it to a different spot this year. We'll see whos going to be more stubborn me or it...

Always glad when you pop in for a visit

kindest regards Zsuzsy

cgull8m from North Carolina on February 12, 2009:

Zsuzsy great hub, you should publish this in Google Knol, it is like a Wikipedia article, every gardener should know. I don't have a fruit tree yet, but I do pruning in rose tree, it really helps and gives out more flowers, bigger and sweet smelling. Without pruning they compete and impede each other.

Zsuzsy Bee (author) from Ontario/Canada on February 09, 2009:

Teton Rose! Always glad when you come by for a visit. Thanks for taking a look and for commenting.

regards Zsuzsy

TetonRose from Utah on February 09, 2009:

Great information! Thanks for making the art of tree pruning so understandable. I've read quite a bit about it but this was easier to understand. I'll be putting it into practice on my daughter's trees soon.

Zsuzsy Bee (author) from Ontario/Canada on February 09, 2009:

Thankyou Bob. I have a couple more hubs in the works about the individual type of trees. (Next week)

Thanks for taking a look and for commenting.

regards Zsuzsy

Bob Ewing from New Brunswick on February 09, 2009:

Excellent hub, pruning is a skill and you have provided a solid step by step understanding of how to do it.

Zsuzsy Bee (author) from Ontario/Canada on February 09, 2009:

Wow! That was fast reading I just published this hub a couple of minutes ago. Thanks for taking a look and for commenting.

regards Zsuzsy

foodstorage from Utah on February 09, 2009:

Great tips. I am thinking about buying some fruit trees this year so I will definitely be back to his hub!

Related Articles