



PRUNING

FRUIT TREES

Don't be afraid to prune your fruit trees. Unpruned trees become too bushy, lose their vigor, and produce smaller fruit. You can't kill fruit trees by pruning incorrectly and you can correct any pruning mistakes as the tree grows.

Once you learn a few simple rules about which branches will bear fruit and how to shape the tree, you are ready to perform the yearly pruning that your fruit trees need. In general, you should do most pruning during the dormant season, but light pruning can be done in the summer to restrain excessive growth.

PRUNING YOUNG TREES

The first pruning provides an opportunity to start determining the eventual shape of the tree. The buds

will sprout in the spring and grow in the general direction they were pointing. The buds nearest the end of each stem will grow more vigorously than those below it. Cut back to buds that are facing the direction you want the branch to grow.

A branch coming off the trunk at nearly a right angle is much stronger than a branch growing at a more upright angle. If a tree does not form good branches (cherries, in particular, do not), you can tie weights or splints onto young branches to force them in a better direction.

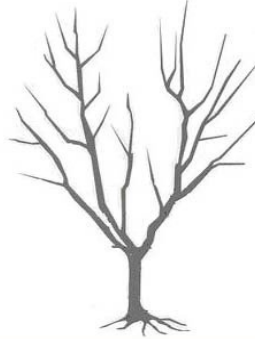
Retain some of the low branches for the first few years. Although these will not figure in the shape planned for the mature tree, the extra leafy growth will help develop trunk strength.

THREE TRAINING STYLES

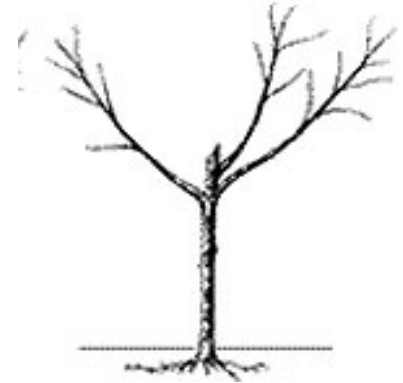
Vase pruning shapes a tree to a short trunk and three or four main limbs, each with several lateral branches. This style creates an open center that allows light and air to reach all branches and promotes fruiting on the interior and lower branches. Vase pruning also helps keep tree height low for easy care and harvesting. This shape is particularly recommended for apricots, peaches, nectarines, and plums. Apples and pears are often pruned to a vase shape. This style is also appropriate for any trees in containers.

Modified central leader pruning shapes a tree to one tall trunk with several major limbs branching off at different levels. This results in a strong form that will support heavy crops and survive stormy weather. The center of the tree is shaded, though, and will not produce much fruit. The taller tree is also more difficult to prune and harvest. Pecan, walnut, and other large trees are usually pruned to a modified central leader. Dwarf trees can also be trained in this style because their small volume does not inhibit interior fruiting.

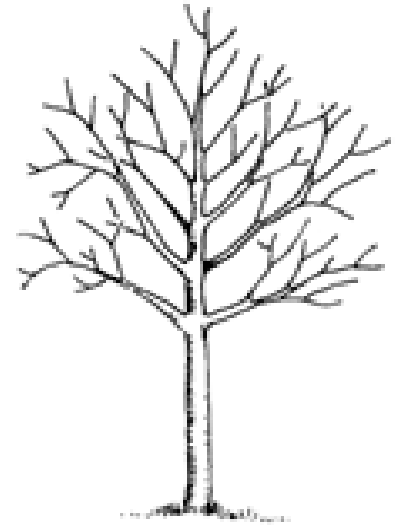
Delayed open center pruning attempts to combine the virtues of both vase and central leader pruning by providing the strength of a central leader and the sunny center of a vase shape. Semidwarf apples, other medium-size trees, and fruit trees planted in lawn areas can be shaped in the delayed open center style.



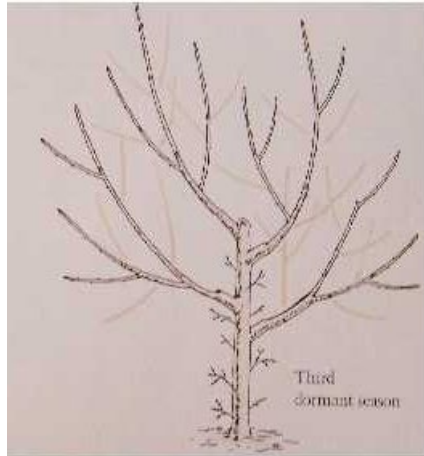
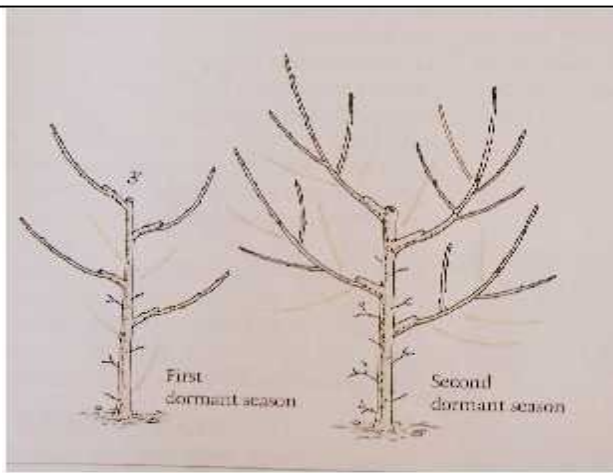
Vase shape. *Three or four scaffold branches are spaced only inches apart on the trunk.*



Delayed open center. *Three or four scaffold branches are spaced a couple of feet apart.*



Modified central leader. *A tall trunk supports several scaffold branches.*



Training to a vase shape. *The scaffold branches are selected the first winter, when the tree is 1 year old, and developed over the next 2 years.*

DEVELOPING VASE SHAPE

Follow this sequence for vase pruning:

1. At planting, cut off the central stem 2 to 3 feet above the ground. Prune any side branches back to two buds.
2. During the first dormant season (a year after you plant the tree) remove the leader and direct growth to three or four strong scaffolds. Choose branches that radiate evenly around the trunk. Maintain about 6 vertical inches between the branches, and keep the lowest scaffold at least 18 inches off the ground. Leave some small branches on the lower trunk to encourage trunk strength. Prune back scaffolds to one-third of their length.
3. During the second dormant season, prune off aggressive new shoots but leave twiggy growth, which will be the fruit-bearing wood in most trees. Choose and encourage additional scaffolds if needed.
4. During the third dormant season, prune to remove any broken limbs or crossing branches, but don't do any more major pruning until the tree has produced a good-sized crop.

PRUNING MATURE TREES

Once the basic shape of a tree has been developed, making pruning decisions according to which branches bear fruit. Most trees produce fruit on short branches, or *spurs*, which will bear fruit for several years. Prune each year to remove excess growth and crossing branches; cut out a portion of the older fruiting wood each year.

Here are some suggestions for pruning specific trees:

Apple. Train standard-size trees to a vase shape and dwarf trees to a central leader. Fruit is produced on short spurs that last 5 to 10 years, and sometimes as long as 20 years. Prune lightly to remove one-tenth of the older wood each year.

Apricot. Prune to a vase shape. Fruit is produced on the previous year's stems and on spurs that last 3 to 4 years. Prune out one-fourth of the older growth and cut one-half of the previous year's stems.

Cherry. Train cherries to the central leader system. Fruit is produced in clusters on small spurs that last for 10 to 12 years. Sweet cherries need to be topped to keep the tree at a manageable size. Remove only weak and crossing branches in yearly pruning. Sour cherries are smaller, bushier plants and should be pruned to increase branch length.

Citrus. Mature citrus should not be pruned except to remove broken or twisted branches. They produce a great many shoots at pruning cuts, which results in a broom effect. Citrus may be bush or tree in form, depending on the variety. Fruit is borne on 1- or 2-year-old wood.

Peach and nectarine. Train to a vase shape. Fruit is produced on the previous year's long stems and on short-lived spurs. Prune back each of last year's stems to one-half its length. Annual pruning is more critical for peaches and nectarines than for any other fruit tree type.

Pear. Train to a modified central leader with five or six scaffold branches. Fruit is produced on small, long-lived spurs. Prune lightly when of fruiting age.

Plum. Plums are divided into two groups: Japanese (table plums such as Santa Rosa and Satsuma) and European (prunes). They are distinguished by the length of their fruiting spurs. Japanese spurs are 3 inches long. European spurs are up to 3 feet long. Both types bear fruit for 6 to 8 years. Some fruit is also produced on the previous year's growth. Remove one-third of the new wood each year by thinning and shortening. When a branch has produced fruit for 8 years, select a new lateral and remove the old branch.

Thinning fruit

Developing fruits should be thinned out on many types of trees. Cherries, citrus, figs, pears, and prunes are the exceptions and do not need thinning. Thinning results in fewer but larger fruits, but it should be done before the fruits are half-grown. Thin apricots so that the fruits are 2 to 3 inches apart; plums, 3 to 4 inches; nectarines, 4 to 5 inches; peaches, 5 to 6 inches; and apples, 8 inches apart, or one fruit per spur.