

PRUNING & CARE OF FRUIT TREES

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March is a good time to begin pruning trees especially fruit trees. The first step is to cut out all diseased wood, disinfecting the saw between cuts with one part solution of bleach like Clorox to nine parts water or at least disinfect between trees, and I like to cut at least 6 inches below the infected area next to another branch or take the branch all the way back to the trunk. Do not cut the branch collar, the area where a branch and trunk or branch and branch connect, since it is the natural healing part of a tree. It is usually a different color or is shown in a pronounced area. Do not cut into the trunk of a tree or leave a stub, by leaving a stub the branch collar will not be able to heal around it and the stub will rot back into the tree. Research does not support painting or putting any sealant on the cuts. For Fruit trees at pruning time and again when a tree is blooming are good times to spray for "Fire blight." Look for a spray that specifically targets this disease such as Streptomycin. Since Fire blight is a bacterial disease a fungal disease product will not help with this disease and spraying for this disease is just preventative not curative.

When pruning, one generally wants an "open" fruit tree. A fruit tree needs lots of light and air circulation to get good fruit production and ripening. A fruit tree produces fruit and not much shade. To make a fruit tree a shade tree, do not prune it and it will produce less fruit and more shade. To prune, first pick 2 to 4 branches from the bottom of a tree as a starting place. These branches need to be evenly distributed around the tree and at least at a 45-degree angle from the top of the trunk. A narrow angle is weak and could cause a branch to break. Next, prune everything above these branches up one to two feet. Continue pruning, alternating branches. Continue this process up to the top of the tree. All suckers and branches growing straight up or down should be pruned. If the tree is at the appropriate height, just cut the central leader out. Another method is to open up the inside of a tree as opposed to using a central leader type system.

There are two important rules to remember: prune 15 percent of last year's growth every year and do not cut more than 25 to 30 percent from a tree in any one year as this causes excess stress. Remember, fruit only grows on last year's growth.

Whether to fertilize trees and shrubs is also a springtime consideration. Most trees, especially fruit trees, do respond to fertilizer. The fertilizer should be spread evenly from the tip of the branches to halfway to the trunk. If there is grass around a tree or shrub, fertilizer should be put into holes evenly spaced around the plant to a depth of 12 inches, which will be below most of the grass roots. Keeping a grass-free area around each tree is a good recommendation. This prevents accidentally damaging the bark of a tree and the tree will grow faster. The amount of bare area around a tree will depend on personal preference and landscaping design. But lawn mowers and weed eaters have damaged or killed a lot of trees. Heavy mulch around trees not only helps prevent grass and weed competition but also helps hold moisture in the soil. Be sure to keep the mulch at least one inch away from the trunk of a tree.

The University of Wyoming and the United States Department of Agriculture, Sheridan County office, cooperate.