

NEWS RELEASE
December 20, 2001

PRUNING HOME FRUIT TREES

BACKYARD HORTICULTURE

By Gary W. Hickman, Horticulture Advisor
University of California Cooperative Extension, Mariposa County

Home fruit tree pruning ranks high on most gardeners' "to do" list during the winter months. While deciduous fruit trees may be pruned at other times of the year, most gardeners do their annual heavy pruning during the tree's dormant period. To remain vigorous and productive, deciduous fruit trees need some annual pruning

If you do not prune your trees enough, they will become too tall to harvest, even with a tall ladder. If you have an unpruned fruit tree in your garden, you know that most of the fruit grows in the top. Yearly pruning is necessary to keep the tree at a reasonable height, for instance, no more than 10 or 12 feet high. If your tree is already overgrown, you may want to reduce its height gradually, say over a two-year period.

The main objectives of pruning mature fruit trees are to reduce the number and increase the size of the potential crop, to develop new fruit wood, to remove interfering and broken branches, and to contain tree height and spread for convenient harvest. Most fruit trees, when not pruned, produce more fruit than they can size and mature properly. You can prevent such overproduction with yearly pruning.

If you do not prune your fruit trees for several years, not only will they grow too tall, but they also become brushy and weak and stop producing satisfactory fruit wood. Some new fruit wood is necessary each year for most trees to keep producing good crops. Which wood becomes fruitful, and at what time, depends on the species of tree. For example, peach and nectarine trees bloom and bear fruit only on one-year-old shoots (branches that grew the previous year).

Therefore, they require heavy pruning each year to develop adequate fruitwood for the following year's crop. Other fruit tree species, such as apples, apricots, cherries, pears and plums bear fruit on growth called "spurs." The number of years the spurs are able to bear fruit depends upon the species; for example, plum spurs may be fruitful for five to eight years; the spurs of apples, pears and cherries may be fruitful for up to ten years. Assuming that your tree has spurs that will bear fruit for five years, heavy enough pruning to produce about one-fifth new spurs each year is necessary to keep your tree bearing properly.

Persimmons, many figs, quinces and pomegranates bear fruit on the current season's growth. When you prune these trees, remove old and weak branches, leaving some younger branches to produce new growth and fruit the coming year. Overcrowding and lack of sunlight will cause branches to die, so you need to thin out some branches to allow light infiltration into the tree so that the fruitwood stays healthy.

Nut trees such as almonds and walnuts do not need as much pruning for height control as fruit trees. You harvest nuts by knocking them down with a long pole, rather than by hand picking, so the trees can be much taller.

For more information, call the University of California Cooperative Extension office in Mariposa, 966-2417, and ask for the leaflet entitled " Training and Pruning Fruit Trees".

The University of California prohibits discrimination against or harassment of any person employed by or seeking employment with the University on the basis of race, color, national origin, religion, sex, physical or mental disability, medical condition (cancer-related or genetic characteristics), ancestry, marital status, age, sexual orientation, citizenship, or status as a covered veteran (special disabled veteran, Vietnam-era veteran or any other veteran who served on active duty during a war or in a campaign or expedition for which a campaign badge has been authorized). University Policy is intended to be consistent with the provisions of applicable State and Federal laws. Inquiries regarding the University's nondiscrimination policies may be directed to the Affirmative Action/Staff Personnel Services Director, University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources, 1111 Franklin, 6th Floor, Oakland, CA 94607-5200, (510) 987-0096.