

Caring for Your Peaches

Every year, we receive calls about how and when to prune peach trees. Hopefully this article will answer some of those questions and provide some additional information that will be useful to the reader for successfully growing peaches at home.

The most common question about pruning is when to prune. February is the best time of year to prune most fruit trees in Louisiana. The coldest part of winter is usually over, and trees will soon be growing and can heal pruning injuries. However, you can prune just after harvest with some degree of success.

It is very important to understand why a tree should be pruned. Fruit trees are pruned to regulate and promote growth; to increase yield; improve fruit size and quality; to open canopy for adequate penetration of light and pesticides; and to shape the tree for convenience of cultural practices and harvest.

The energy for plant growth comes from light. Leaves intercept light and the light energy is converted to chemical energy in the process of photosynthesis. The chemical energy is in the form of carbohydrates, which are transported around in the tree and used for growth. For maximum flower bud development, shoots must be exposed to light during June and early July. This is the main reason the peaches should be grown in full sun. Peach trees shaded by other trees will not produce much fruit.

The first step in pruning is to remove any dead, broken or diseased branches. Branches should be cut back to a fork or bud. Generally, a ridge or area of wrinkled wood is around the base of the branch. This is called the branch collar.

The collar has the ability to heal nearby wounds and should not be cut. The limb should be cut just outside the collar. The branch collar will then quickly grow over the cut surface. Do not leave a stub sticking out of the collar. The collar will not be able to grow over the cut surface, and the stub will frequently die. This will sometimes lead to a hollow in the tree.

Next, remove branches that grow toward the center of the tree. These branches will often cross other limbs and cause rubbing injury. These limbs also will prevent light penetration and air circulation, which reduces fruit coloring and encourages diseases. Limbs of equal size that form a sharp V will tend to split apart. One of the limbs should be removed before the limbs get very large.

Limb growth can be directed by pruning back to a bud or shoot that is pointing toward the direction where growth is desired. This procedure allows the tree to be shaped or to fill in gaps in tree structure.

Peaches are typically pruned to a three-limb open center form. This method allows sunlight into the tree and enables the fruit to develop proper color. The upper shoots can be tipped to keep trees low enough that the fruit can be harvested without the aid of ladders. Failure to control tree height will cause the lower branches to be shaded out.

As peach trees age, they become less vigorous. Good fruiting wood becomes more scarce and is often located at the ends of long, leggy limbs. If this is the case with your tree(s) your objective should be to encourage the production of good fruiting shoots. Old trees can be invigorated by cutting back into wood that is 3 or more years old. Cut to good outward-growing side limbs. Pruning to invigorate old trees will reduce the following season's crop because much bearing surface is lost, but it is the only way to renew the tree. Increasing the nitrogen fertilizer by 10 to 20 % may also help encourage new growth.

Trees that are moderately to heavily pruned will grow new wood during the two seasons following treatment. Such severe pruning to renew old trees is successful only when trees are in reasonably good vigor. If the tree is covered with lichens, that tree is under great stress and renewal pruning may not be profitable. It is best to remove the old trees and replant the entire new ones.

Fertilizer should be applied during the dormant season, preferably February. In lawns, you may want to place fertilizer in 6 inch deep holes around the tree. Holes should be evenly placed around the tree and should not exceed the recommended total amount of fertilizer per tree. As a general rule, fertilize these trees with 1 to 1 ½ pounds of 8-8-8 per year of tree age. No more than 8 pounds per tree should be used. Be sure to get a soil test.