

## Pruning Fruit Trees

The second half of January brought numerous phone calls to my office regarding pruning fruit trees, including peaches, figs, pears, and plum trees. The majority of the callers inquired into the proper timing for pruning fruit trees on their property. Pruning fruit trees in the middle of January is not a suggested practice, so I recommended my clients to wait until at least the middle of February. With the coldest part of winter behind us, the trees will soon be growing and before we know it spring will be right around the corner.

There are several reasons why you should wait until February to prune trees. For one, the average last frost date in this part of Louisiana is March 15th, so waiting until the latter part of February to start pruning decreases the chance for damage from a late frost. It is also best to wait and prune at a time when the tree can heal pruning injuries and not be so stressed. Pruning too early might encourage growth, especially with the fluctuations in temperature we've been experiencing lately. This tender new growth could be severely damaged if we happen to get a late frost. For young trees, it is typically better to wait until late February or early March, which gives the trees a chance to break bud. Pruning after the trees have broken bud will allow you to go through and assess which limbs are dead, diseased, decayed, or otherwise damaged.

In addition to improving tree health by removing dead or injured limbs, pruning fruit trees also eases harvesting by shaping and reducing tree height. Pruning will also increase flower production on trees that bloom on new growth, such as peaches. Proper pruning will also allow for more light to reach the fruit, in turn improving fruit color. Thinning the fruit crop later in the season will further improve the fruit quality by improving fruit size and sugar content.

It is important to follow proper pruning techniques when pruning fruit trees. The LSU AgCenter has informative publications on the issue, which are available both online and in your local LSU AgCenter office. In pruning, the first step is to remove those dead, diseased, decayed and damaged limbs that I mentioned above. The branches should be cut back to a fork or bud, but be careful not to cut the branch collar, which is a ridge or area of wrinkled wood found around the base of the branch. The branch collar serves to heal nearby wounds, in which it quickly grows over the cut surface. That being said, you should not leave a stub sticking out of the collar because the collar will not be able to grow over the cut surface.

The next step is to remove the branches that grow toward the center of the tree. Branches that cross other limbs which could cause rubbing injuries should be removed. Additionally, removing these center branches will increase light penetration and air circulation to the center of the tree canopy. If there are any limbs of equal size that form a sharp "V" shape, one of the limbs should be removed before the limbs get very large to prevent splitting. Limb growth can be directed by pruning back to a bud or shoot that is pointing toward the direction where growth is desired. Knowing the pruning process can help you assess each individual tree beforehand to decide which limbs need to be removed on each tree.

Different methods of pruning are used on different fruit species. For example, peach, nectarine, and Japanese plum produce fruit on 1 year old wood. Apple and pear trees produce fruit on short spurs that last 10 to 15 years, thus excessive pruning will remove the fruiting spurs and reduce crop size. Figs produce fruit on current season wood, although some varieties will produce an early crop on the previous season's wood. Figs typically do not need heavy pruning, but if you need to reduce the height of the tree, you may cut it back by 1/3 to 1/2. For more specific information about this topic contact Sara Rogers, Jackson Parish County Agent, with the LSU AgCenter at 259-5690 or [srogers@agcenter.lsu.edu](mailto:srogers@agcenter.lsu.edu).