

Ag Column
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December 21, 2015

When Do I Prune My Fruit Trees and Other Fruit?

As we move into winter, I always get questions about whether or not it is a good time to prune plants, especially fruit. With the mild fall weather, we are in a unique situation considering pruning. Without a sustained cold period, plants have not gone into dormancy which makes plants more susceptible to cold injury. Dr. David Lockwood, UT Extension Fruit Specialist, recommends to wait as late as possible in the dormant period as you can before pruning, but make sure you start early enough to get all pruning done before the plants break dormancy.

January is quickly approaching and the ten day forecast is predicting unusually warm weather. Don't be surprised if we have a sudden drop of 50 to 60 degrees over one to two days. Probability of cold damage is high when we have an abrupt temperature drop. Even after becoming dormant, plants can come out of dormancy with warm temperatures. As this can happen very quickly, they will require a longer period of time to regain dormancy. We often see fruit injury due to fluctuating temperatures in Tennessee and Southwest Virginia. Lockwood says the hardiness level of a plant assumes the plant is healthy, that it is fully dormant and that the temperatures leading up to the cold event are consistently low and that the duration of the cold event is relatively short. With severe temperature fluctuations, that same plant may be damaged at 10 or 15 degrees F or higher than listed in the nursery catalog, depending on the circumstances.

With the recent and current weather in mind, it will be very important to delay pruning this year. Most fruit buds were formed last year, so the fruiting potential for 2016 has already been determined. Fruit buds will be more sensitive to cold injury than leaf buds that were formed earlier in the year. Heavy pruning is often necessary to regain productivity in trees that haven't been pruned and can be used to thin a fruit crop. Pruning to thin a fruit crop may be necessary to maintain balance as fruit trees tend to move toward a heavy fruiting year followed by a light fruiting year. To summarize, keep in mind fruit should be pruned while dormant. Currently, fruit may not have gone fully dormant this year so fruit bud injury may be more likely. You should plan to wait longer into the winter this year to prune your fruit to minimize cold injury and maximize fruiting potential.

Pruning Photos:

Wait until full dormancy to prune



Asian Pears



Pruning Class: Trees



Pruning Class – Grape Vines

