

Ag Column
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Prune for Larger and Quality Fruit

It's time to start thinking about pruning your fruit trees. Late winter is the ideal time to fruit trees. If you get busy and don't get your fruit trees pruned soon, the buds will swell sometime in March depending on elevation. If you prune after bud swell, you risk damaging fruit buds and affecting your fruit yield.

Pruning aids in disease control, promotes fruit yield, and enables you to manage a tree's size.

The following are considerations for properly pruning a fruit tree:

- 1- Remove root suckers from the base of the tree.
- 2- Remove all dead, broken, diseased, or insect-infested branches.
- 3- Remove branches that turn downward.
- 4- When limbs are closer than 24 inches, choose the inferior branch and remove.
- 5- Remove suckers or watersprouts growing from top of branches.
- 6- Eliminate branches that touch.
- 7- After larger cuts are made, thin the tree.
- 8- Try to not remove more than $\frac{1}{4}$ of tree in one year.

Pruning allows better sunlight, air movement and spray coverage. Removing old Fireblight damage will help control infection for the coming growing season. Fireblight-damaged wood, which will be shriveled and dark, should be cut out removing wood several inches past the point of infection. Fireblight infections can often be identified by the limb taking the shape of a shepherd's crook on the tip. Sanitize your pruners with alcohol between trees to avoid spreading disease.

Dr. David Lockwood, UT Extension Fruit Specialist, suggests trees have the potential of producing a larger crop than they are able to sustain, resulting in smaller and poorer quality fruit. Trees often get in a cycle of producing a large crop one year and hardly any at all the next. Dormant pruning removes some of the fruit buds as they are formed the previous growing season.

Pruning can also be a tool to manage tree size. If a tree is too large, we cannot spray, prune, or harvest fruit to properly manage the tree. Now, don't get the idea that you can manage a standard size apple tree to the same height that you can manage a semi-dwarf or dwarf tree, as this would most likely remove much or all of the fruit bearing wood of the tree.

Don't be afraid to prune. The worst thing you can do is NOT prune.