

Properly Pruning Apple Trees

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Apple trees are an important part of many landscapes and proper pruning practices are important for productive healthy trees. The general purpose of pruning fruit trees is to regulate growth, improve fruit size and quality, control tree size, and reduce production costs. Pruning is necessary to shape the trees for convenience of culture and for repair of damage. Most pruning is done during the dormant season, preferably just before active growth begins in the spring.

Young, Nonbearing Apple Trees

Training should be emphasized in the development of trees, with pruning used as a tool in the training process to redirect limbs, stimulate branching when desired, or to remove growth that is in an undesirable location. Future pruning of an apple tree is greatly affected by early training.

Limb Spreading

Limb-spreading is a very important part of a tree-training program. A limb orientation around 60 degrees from vertical is desired. Horizontal orientation (greater than 60 degrees) of limbs results in the development of vigorous watersprouts along the upper surface of the limb, at the expense of potential fruiting spurs. Spreaders, made of steel wire about 1/8" thick or wooden strips with finishing nails in each end, are inserted between the selected scaffold limb and the main trunk of the tree.

Bearing Trees

When pruning, older, bearing trees should be pruned first. Young, nonbearing apple trees and stone fruits should not be pruned until after February 1 to minimize chances of winter injury. The balance desired between vegetative and fruiting growth is influenced by the crop load, fertilization, and pruning. Low vigor can be the result of inadequate fertilization, no pruning, excessive cropping, or shading of fruiting wood. Good fruiting wood requires moderate vigor and exposure to good light levels.

Relative tree shape is critical in successful apple production. Trees should be pruned to achieve a shape which maximizes light penetration. Trees should be cone-shaped, or larger at the bottom than the top, to maximize adequate light exposure.

Pruning should be a regular practice. Heading cuts should only be used where branching is desired or in areas where vigor is low. Drooping or low-hanging branches should be removed or pruned to a lateral that is positioned above horizontal. Remove crossing, dead, or damaged limbs. Watersprouts should be removed unless one is needed for the development of new bearing surface.

For more detailed information contact your local Extension office.