

## Winter Protection for Fruit Trees (published 2025-11-29)

By Kate O'Lenic, Master Gardener

Fruit trees can withstand some of the harsh winter weather, but to be sure your trees are happy and productive next year, there are ways to protect them that are easy and inexpensive. This is especially important for young trees. You'll also get to enjoy the crisp fall weather!

First, tidy up the area around the trees. Rake up leaves and fallen fruit. Fruit lying on the ground can attract deer or other animals that could chew on branches and bark. Rotting apples on the ground can harbor maggots that will infest your trees in the spring. Leaves and litter can also host fungi that can cause apple scab. This will ensure that insects and diseases lurking on the ground are removed.

Remove any suckers that may have sprouted up. If any fruit is still on the tree, be sure to remove it, too. Check the tree for any damaged limbs and remove them or mark them for removal in early spring.

Mow the grass under and near the tree as low as possible. Remove weeds near the tree carefully. Avoid using a string trimmer as it may damage the bark. Clearing the area of grass and weeds around the tree makes it easier to apply wraps or guards around the trunk. The open space also deters mice from feasting on your tree bark. Make sure mulch is not touching the tree trunk. Keep mulch about 4 to 6 inches away from the bark to prevent disease or rot. This also deters mice, voles, and diseases from damaging the base of the tree because they like to stay out of open areas. Mice may also eat roots which may not be obvious until it's too late.

To further protect against mice and rabbits damaging the tree bark, wrap the base of the tree with a guard. Commercially available wraps or quarter-inch hardware cloth work well. Leave some room around the trunk to prevent rubbing the bark. Close the ends together with string or zip ties. Tuck the guard a few inches below the soil level and high enough to extend above the level of snow.

Now is also a good time to have the soil tested if not done within the past 3 years or so. If pH requires amendment, applying the lime now per testing instructions will give it time to work its magic over the winter. If the soil test results indicate that fertilizer is needed, it should be added after November 15<sup>th</sup> to avoid late-season growth. After mid-November, fertilizer applied will be absorbed slowly and more efficiently. This will give the tree a nice boost in the spring.

If lack of rain is a problem, keep watering young trees until the ground is frozen and the trees are dormant. Lack of adequate water can cause stress and make trees more susceptible to pests and disease. If the soil is dry, water deeply to ensure the top 6 inches of soil around the tree, out to the drip line, receive water.

Investing in the late-season care of your fruit trees will reward you in spring with healthy trees.

## Resources

“Fruit Tree Care Calendar,” <https://marinette.extension.wisc.edu/files/2021/03/FRTCALEN.pdf>

“Home Orchard Calendar,” <https://extension.psu.edu/home-orchard-calendar>

“Maintenance of Fruit Plantings: Preparing for Winter,” <https://www.umass.edu/agriculture-food-environment/home-lawn-garden/fact-sheets/maintenance-of-fruit-plantings-preparing-for-winter>

“Preparing Fruit Trees for Winter,” <https://www.uvm.edu/extension/news/preparing-fruit-trees-winter>

“Fertilizing Landscape Trees,” <https://utia.tennessee.edu/publications/wp-content/uploads/sites/269/2023/10/SP548.pdf>

“Watering trees, shrubs in the fall and winter is a balancing act,” <https://extension.illinois.edu/news-releases/watering-trees-shrubs-fall-and-winter-balancing-act>

**2026 MASTER GARDENER PROGRAM** Enroll now for classes at the Sullivan County Extension office beginning January 27, 2026. Go to [2026 Tennessee Extension Master Gardener Program/Training | Sullivan County](#) for details.

For more information about gardening, visit UTHORT’s YouTube site for helpful videos: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCjS3d1IkIH1OZ1Z2qPvhgfQ>

Or Washington County’s YouTube site: <https://www.youtube.com/@utextensionwashingtoncounty>

### **How do I ask a question?**

If you have a question for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at [www.netmga.net](http://www.netmga.net). Click the link at the top of the page, “ASK A MASTER GARDENER” to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.

*The Master Gardener Program is offered by the University of Tennessee Extension. The purpose of the Master Gardener program is to train people as horticultural-educated volunteers. These volunteers work in partnership with the local Extension office in their counties to expand educational outreach, providing home gardeners with researched-based information.*