Pruning & Training of Fruit Trees

Most fruit trees require regular pruning to establish good structure and enhance fruit quality. A well-pruned tree allows air and light penetration, which help with disease prevention and fruit ripening. Different types of fruit trees require specific pruning practices due to their growth and fruit bearing habits. Please refer to the table on the reverse for specifics.

The tree form you choose depends on the tree’s natural growth habit and your preferences. There are three main forms commonly used for fruit trees: central leader, open center, and modified central leader. The framework for each form should be established when the tree is young. Goals for this framework include strong branches to support heavy fruit, allowing good light distribution, avoiding crossing branches.

A central leader form has a leader (the main trunk which grows upright in the center) with lateral branches, called scaffolds, growing off the leader in three or four well-spaced layers. The top layers are shorter than the bottom, forming an oval or pyramidal shape. This form is best suited to trees that naturally grow upright with a central trunk. You can encourage scaffold branching during winter pruning by cutting off a third of the previous season’s growth of the central leader. Usually the uppermost bud develops into a new vertical leader. If two leaders develop, keep the stronger and completely remove the other.

In an open center form, the young tree’s central leader is headed back to the top of a whorl of branches, eventually resulting in three to five scaffolds that start three to four feet from the ground. Growth continues outwards, along the scaffolds. As lateral branches develop, prune out branches which cross or shade each other. This form is good for trees with a natural vase shape, such as peaches and plums, and can help keep a tree shorter.

A modified central leader tree combines the two forms discussed above. Five to six scaffolds are established in a whorl. At about six feet from the ground, head back the central leader to the point where a strong scaffold is growing outward. The tree is then treated like an open center.
Mature trees are pruned to maintain their form, remove weak, diseased, or broken branches, and promote an open shape while improving fruit quality. If you are looking to renovate an old, neglected fruit tree, plan on doing it over the course of three to five years to avoid more water sprouts than you can imagine. First remove all dead wood. You can safely remove one-third to one-half of living branches in a year, so gradually remove poorly structured, crossing, and low growing limbs, approaching one of the basic forms.

A good book on pruning and training can be a valuable ally in this process – and you can always stop by our Information Desk with any questions.