

HORTICULTURE NEWSLETTER

Jason Graves, Central Kansas District, Horticulturist

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Fruit Trees

We started this month with quite a cold snap, but as temperatures improve there are some things that fruit growers need to be aware of.

Pruning of fruit trees can be started now. Although it isn't a good idea to prune when the temperature is below 20 degrees, the trees have been dormant for several weeks now and can be pruned safely when a nice day arrives. Pruning needs to be finished by the beginning of spring, especially before the buds swell. It is best to prune when the temperature won't fall below 40 degrees for 24 hours. Ideally pruning time can extend through March, but getting the job done sooner may be a good idea.

When pruning, start with the older trees first. The older and larger wood will tolerate lower temperatures better than young wood will. The rule of thumb is to never remove more than 30 percent of the tree at one time. First remove any dead wood from the tree followed by any suckers that have grown up during the previous years.

If you are working with an overgrown tree, choose approximately six of the best branches to keep as scaffold branches. Remove all others. Candidates for removal include branches with narrow crotch angles, which are more likely to break in wind and ice storms, and those that cross branches you will save. This may be all that is possible the first year if the 30 percent threshold has been reached.

The following season you can continue by thinning the branches on each scaffold branch and removing crowded branches to open up the tree to light and allow humidity to escape. Shorten each scaffold branch by cutting back to a side branch. When you are through, the tree should have enough wood removed so that a small ball can be thrown through the tree. Later, the tree will produce vigorous side shoots from the trunk and vertical shoots from the scaffold branches called water sprouts or suckers. These water sprouts are unproductive and should be removed throughout the growing season so the center of the tree stays open.

It is important to keep fruit trees on a pruning schedule. Apple and peach trees require very regular pruning to be productive. Pruning also reduces the chance of damage by wind.

If you are looking for a fruit tree that requires little to no pruning consider a pear tree. These fruit trees grow well with little attention, but like apple and some peach trees, you must have more than one cultivar since cross-pollination is needed to produce fruit.

A Note for Peach Tree Growers

Peach tree growers should also take note that it is time to think about peach leaf curl control. Peach leaf curl is a major disease of peach trees and results in swollen, distorted, and reddish-green colored leaves. The disease severely weakens trees as leaves unfold in the spring and thus can substantially reduce fruit production.

To control the fungus, growers should apply a single fungicide application either in the fall after leaf drop or in the spring before bud swell. Once the buds swell it is too late for treatment. Don't apply the spray unless it is warm enough for the buds to completely dry before a freeze. There are several fungicides labeled for this disease. Thoroughly cover the entire tree during application. It is much easier to get good coverage if the tree has already been pruned.

K-State Research and Extension can provide information on pruning and on fruit trees, so contact your local extension office for more information on any fruit growing topics.