DIVISION OF
AGRICULTURAL SCIENCES
AND NATURAL RESOURCES
NEWS RELEASE

Proper pruning of fruit trees helps ensure productivity

There isn't anything much better than freshly picked fruit and berries. In an effort to help ensure your fruit trees and shrubs are as productive as possible, it's important to prune them properly.

The goals of pruning fruit trees and shrubs are to maintain proper structure and enhance fruit production. These goals can be achieved in different ways for different types of fruits. For all plants, there are a few basic pruning needs that must be done each year. First, remove any dead or diseased limbs. Then, cut back broken branches to a healthy lateral branch or bud.

For those who grow blueberries, use renewal pruning each year to maintain productivity. This type of pruning is for plants at least six years old. The oldest two to three canes are removed each season, encouraging new growth to replace the older canes. Don't remove too many canes at one time because the fruit buds already are set on these canes. For newer plants, focus on establishing good structure. Ideally, you want your blueberry bush to be narrow at the base to protect the crown and open in the upper two thirds to allow good air flow and light penetration. Remove crossing canes and those growing through the center to promote an open canopy.

Elderberries are pruned in a similar manner to blueberries, but often require heavier pruning. The more vigorous cultivars send up many new canes each year. The canes reach full height in one season and produce lateral branches in their second year. These second-year canes are the most fruitful, while older shoots become less vigorous. Gardeners can use this growth pattern to determine what stems to cut. Each year, remove all canes that are older than three years and leave an equal number of one-, two-, and three-year-old canes. If you have a very overgrown elderberry that has not been maintained for many years, consider rejuvenation pruning, which is cutting all the canes to the ground to reclaim a healthy, productive shrub.

Gooseberries and currants are pruned in a similar manner to elderberries. It's important to maintain balanced numbers of one-, two- and three-year-old shoots. Each year, the oldest canes are removed, and the newest canes thinned to allow just enough to replace the older shoots. It's important to maintain an open center and avoid overcrowding on gooseberries and currants.

This open center structure also is used for several varieties of fruit trees. Peach, Japanese plum and apricot trees all use an open center structure. Wait as long as possible to prune peaches, as the flower buds are often damaged by early spring frosts. Inspection of the buds will tell you if damage has occurred because the center of the bud will be blackened. In years that blossom injury occurs, gardeners will want to prune more lightly, leaving more flower buds on the tree. If no freeze damage occurs, you can prune more heavily.

In years where no injury occurs, remove about one-third of the previous season's growth. Start by removing broken and damaged limbs, and any that cross into the center of the tree. Keep in mind you'll want to maintain an open bowl shape. Remove weak side branches, and cut back the larger branches by cutting them just above a vigorous lateral branch. Then, remove the smaller, weaker branches below that lateral branch. It's a good idea to maintain the tree at a height that is easily reached from the ground.

Peaches are probably the most heavily pruned fruit trees. You should go lighter on your plums and apricots.

Apple and pear trees generally are pruned to the shape of a Christmas tree, with a central leader and several scaffold or side branches. The same is true of cherries. Sour cherries grow best in Oklahoma and generally require little pruning. However, they often develop very long, pole-like branches that grow too high. To keep the tree lower and more manageable, cut these long branches back to a lateral branch that is growing more or less horizontal to the ground. This will encourage outward growth, rather than upward growth. Look for a lateral that is about ¾-inch in diameter. Also, remove any branches that are growing too close to the ground.

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