

Ask a Specialist: Pruning Pointers

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Though recent storms may have already removed tree branches, it is still time to think pruning. There is probably no gardening task that generates as much fear in home gardeners as fruit tree pruning, and because of this, many homeowners want to ignore it. However, if ignored, the trees will only get worse. Consider these tips that will help take the pain out of fruit tree pruning.

- Do it. Pruning is as much an art as it is a science, and it simply takes practice.
- Remove all dead, diseased or broken branches. Branches that hang down below the horizon line, or "hangers," are generally not productive and should be removed as well.
- Remove all suckers and water sprouts. Suckers grow from the base of the tree. Water sprouts are succulent growth from the previous year and usually shoot straight into the air from more established scaffold branches. Water sprouts compete for light. They are not productive and should be removed. They are best controlled in the summer when they are only 2 to 4 inches long. They can be easily removed by rubbing or breaking them.
- Know where the fruit is formed. Peaches are formed on last year's branches. Apples, pears, cherries and plums are all found on short, stubby branches called spurs. Spurs typically are formed on wood that is 2 to 5 years old. Knowing where the fruit is formed helps determine what to prune as well as how harshly to prune. For example, peaches found on year-old wood should be pruned severely to stimulate enough growth this year to support fruit next year. Apples and other fruits that form on spurs are pruned less drastically to reduce the amount of vegetative growth or water sprouts.
- Let in the light. In order to form fruit, trees need optimal sun exposure. When leaves receive sun exposure, more carbohydrates are made. This sends more sugars to the fruit. Fruit trees that have shaded interiors are far less productive than those that receive proper sunlight.

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