It’s Once Again Fruit Tree Pruning Season

Summer and fall 2025 apple, pear and peach harvests are literally months away, but now is the time to begin to help your trees be more (pardon the pun) fruitful. Many of us are well meaning and plant our fledgling tree sprouts with all the intentions of training them properly to be well shaped and manageable.

Reality intervenes however and our trees become neglected tangles of shoots and stems. The only cure for this situation is an aggressive dormant season pruning to bring some order out of the chaos. Now to be honest, training a young tree along with some summer pruning is a much more desirable way to achieve correct tree form and function. Dormant pruning is the removal of past growth in an attempt to correct the tree shape and light penetration for fruiting but the perfect tree will rarely if ever be the result.

Training a tree relates to using light weights and ties to “shape” the tree into a conical Christmas tree shape with a single main leader (center shoot.) Trained trees will feature a scaffold whorl about 24-36 inches off the ground where four branches circle the leader at 90 degree intervals around the trunk. Above the first whorl will be a “clean” section of trunk followed by another scaffold whorl that hopefully will be turned 45 degrees from the whorl below and again circle the trunk at 90 degree intervals. Years of growth will produce more whorls until the desired tree height is achieved.

Sunlight is critical to tree growth and cropping. Pruning can alter light interception and its utilization by the tree. Sunlight is the sole source of energy for plant growth. Green leaves intercept light energy and convert it to chemical energy through the process of photosynthesis. Photosynthetic products (carbohydrates) are required for vegetative growth, fruit set, fruit growth, fruit color, and flower bud initiation and development. Tree size, shape, and density greatly influence the quantity of light inter­cepted by a tree and the distribution of light through the tree canopy, which is heavily shaded, also increases ­tree canopy.

The best time to prune fruit trees in Virginia is late winter after the threat of severe cold. However, fruit producers with large acreages must start early to prune all trees before bloom. Pruning should be delayed until most leaves have fallen, and trees should not be pruned during or just before extremely cold weather. Pruning should also be avoided during or just after exception­ally warm weather. Young trees should be pruned last because they grow vigorously and harden (develop low temperature tolerance) later in the fall than older trees.

As a rule of thumb, apple trees need to be pruned to remove growth that either grows across other branches or grow straight up through the tree. Pear, plum, or cherry trees follow the same procedure. Peach trees need to be opened up in the center to create a vase-shaped canopy. Fruiting will be affected adversely if the tree is pruned too aggressively so it really is an art to know when to say when! The best way to maximize fruiting is to train your young trees to grow in sectors around the trunk and allow an equal spacing of branches around the tree.

During the early years, emphasis should be on training rather than pruning because any pruning will tend to delay flowering. Pruning should be limited to remov­ing branches that have unsuitable crotch angles and to branches that are in undesirable positions for proper tree development. Special attention must be given to the selection of properly spaced scaffold branches, spread­ing branches to the proper orientation, and maintenance of the central leader. The central leader should not be allowed to fruit because the weight of fruit will cause the leader to bend over, which causes a globular shaped canopy that receives poor light distribution. The early fruiting of lateral branches, however, can be regulated to assist in limb spreading, provided the weight of the fruit does not bend the branch to a position below the horizontal.

Upcoming Events

Jan 28 VFGC Winter Conference, Wytheville

Jan 30 Smyth Washington Cattleman Annual Meeting, 4-H Center, 6:30 PM

Feb 4-6 VCE Winter Conference, Campus

Feb 7 Deadline to consign calves to March VQA Sale

March 3 Smyth Washington Cattleman Meeting, 6:30 PM, 4-H Center, Topic Mineral Nutrition

March 18 VQA Calf Sale

If you are a person with a disability and desire any assistive devices, services or other accommodation to participate in this activity, please contact Andy Overbay or Pam Testerman at 276-706-8339 /TDD (800) 828-1120) during business hours of 8:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. to discuss accommodations 5 days prior to the event.