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How to Prune Apple Trees

By Paul Curran

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In this article you will find out how to prune apple trees. (One of several articles from the author on how to prune fruit trees). Pruning apple trees can be done several ways. This operation often causes concern, and considerable variation in ideas exists on the subject, generally. Concerning bush trees in the small garden, the following points should be borne in mind. First, one may ask, "what happens if no pruning is done at all"?

The answer is that too much growth may be made, the branches will be too congested and, although fruit will be borne, it may be smaller than it should be. Then, the stage may be reached when growth will slow down, and too many fruit buds will be formed in relation to the new growth. In short, one has to aim at a balance between wood (shoot) growth and fruit bud formation.

If very hard pruning is done after the early years more wood growth than is needed may be produced and fruiting will be delayed. One method of how to prune apple trees to avoid, is the cutting off of all the new growth at the same level each year, i.e. beheading a tree at a given height. This only encourages more wood growth, and gives the tree little chance to make fruit spurs and fruit buds.

How to prune apple trees – Pruning of a young tree

To start with the pruning of a young tree, after planting, this may have 3 or 4 main branches. The 1-year-old wood (the newest growth) should be cut back half way, to an outward-facing bud. Strong shoots may be cut back less hard, and weaker branches

rather harder. Next autumn, or winter, the new growth that arises from this cutting back is treated similarly. Keep only the best two or three shoots that arise from the original branches (leaders) and cut out any shoots that cross the centre of the bush, the aim being to encourage an outward framework of branches, i.e. cup shaped.

The main shoots should be treated similarly for the following years. Meanwhile, the main branches will be furnished with side shoots (laterals) and all these that grow out from the tree (outward that is) can be left their full length. Those growing inwards should be cut back each winter to two buds from the base.

In connection with how to prune apple trees, in the early years, the question of whether fruit formed in the first season after planting should be left or removed, is often raised. If the tree is making good growth. I suggest that a few fruits be retained. To leave many may cause a check in growth.

How to prune apple trees – Regulated System

A logical stage forward from no pruning is the method known as the Regulated System. This can be followed with standard trees, half standards and strong-growing bush trees, i.e. those on vigorous root stocks. Briefly, with established trees this entails only the removal of crowded or crossing branches, thinning out unwanted shoots, and taking out any dead wood. With this method on how to prune apple trees, sizeable branches have sometimes to be removed, and a pruning saw, with a curved blade is best used for this purpose. The cut surfaces of sawn off branches should be painted over with white lead paint to prevent entry of disease spores.

How to prune apple trees – Spur Pruning

For established bush trees on the less-vigorous root stocks, the harder method of pruning, called Spur Pruning, is sometimes followed. This, however, is best modified to give a method called the Established Spur System. This is designed to encourage a system of fruiting spurs, close to the main branch-work, and is useful for weaker growing varieties in particular. New lateral growth from the branch frame work is pruned back to two or three buds from the branch. New growth will arise from these buds, which will in turn be pruned similarly the following year.

A spur system of fruit buds will be formed at the base of these shoots which will bear the fruit. These spur systems will need to be thinned out, as they begin to crowd the tree, in order to encourage new growth and reduce the amount of blossom. Some laterals growing towards the outside of the tree may be left to extend naturally; these will form fruit buds and bear the earliest fruit while the spur system is being formed.

Some varieties bear fruit on the ends of the shoots, tip bearers, as they are called, and it is essential to make provision for a certain amount of unpruned wood. These unpruned laterals may be cut back to fruit buds or spurs, when their length demands. In short this method on how to prune apple trees aims at a compromise between hard spur pruning and leaving some laterals unpruned.

How to prune apple trees – Renewal System

From spur pruning, a further method has been evolved, called the Renewal System. This method which may at first appear complicated to the amateur is, in fact, a successful way of controlling wood and fruit formation to the best advantage. It consists of shortening a proportion of the annual growth in order to produce more wood, leaving some unpruned to form fruit buds. These should be well spaced out over the branch length, to ensure that fruit will not be crowded. The number of laterals, or new growths, to be shortened, depends on the variety and growth of the apple trees.

A strongly growing tree can carry more fruit, therefore perhaps half of the laterals could be shortened and half left untouched. On a weaker tree, which tends to form fruit buds at the expense of new growth, 2 in 3 of the laterals may be pruned. In this system the individual characteristics of the tree need to be catered for; there is no hard and fast rule. Laterals which are pruned to 2 or 3 ins. in length, will form new wood, which is treated as before, either to be left, or shortened in due course.

How to prune apple trees – Cordon Trees

Basically, these are Spur Pruned; that is, all the young growth, each year, is shortened back to within 2 or 3 buds of the base, where fruit buds will form and a spur system is built up. Space, or lack of it, often dictates that this hard cutting back has to be done, to keep the trees within limits.

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A modified system is to leave some of the longer laterals full length and curl them round in a circle, tying them firmly with fillis string to make a loop. These loops will form fruit buds along their length in subsequent years, and may be left intact so long as there is room for them. As others are retained, the oldest may be cut out. Espalier trees may be treated in the same way as Cordons.

How to prune apple trees – Biennial

Bearing Some varieties of apples tend to produce a heavy crop one year and a light one the next. If one has several trees, this tends to balance out, as all the trees may not have the same "on or off" tendency. If one has only 1 or 2 trees however, biennial bearing could cause a total loss of crop one season, and the trees would be likely to produce a heavier crop than usual the next year, and a lighter than average the following season.

Where this is happening, before the expected cropping year, pruning of new wood should be very light, and spur systems should be reduced. A proportion, say one third, of the blossom should be removed at flowering time. In other words aim at reducing the over-heavy crops. Finally, when you have learnt how to prune apple trees, all pruning should be done when the trees are dormant, i.e. in autumn or winter.

Paul Curran is CEO of Cuzcom Internet Publishing Group and webmaster at Trees-and-Bushes.com, providing access to their nursery supplier for a range of quality plants, trees, bushes, shrubs, seeds and garden products.

The Secret To Pruning Apple Trees

By Robert Mosse

The overall theory of pruning apple trees is to first train the young apple tree to grow efficiently, and then to promote the best production of good quality fruit as the tree matures.

By training a young apple tree to grow "correctly" you enable the tree to develop a strong structure that will be able to support heavy apple growth, plus you will have a tree shape that is easy to manage in later years. A well-applied regimen of training and pruning apple trees stimulates strong growth of only those branches you wish to keep as lasting parts of the mature tree.

Once the young apple tree has been trained for several years to form its shape, annual pruning then becomes the means of keeping the desired shape and encouraging the best fruit production. Most

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pruning is done to encourage growth, and this type of pruning is done in late winter while trees are dormant. The wounds inflicted by pruning heal best then, plus flower buds are easy to spot. You can also prune your trees in late summer, but only if you wish to discourage growth.

So what is the secret to pruning apple trees? Simply put, the best apples will grow on branches that are from two to five years old. To keep a good supply of branches at this age, prune the older branches out each year, allowing younger branches to replace them.

Here's how:

Apple Tree Pruning Basics

Most apple trees grown by home gardeners are small-to-medium sized, and are best trained to the central-leader or pyramid system of pruning. The central-leader pruning method suits trees that have a dominant central trunk with lateral branches at regular intervals. In essence, it is a cone or pyramid shaped tree.

With the central leader pruning method, more sunlight is allowed to reach inside the tree. Basically, you prune the upper branches to stay shorter than the lower branches. Wide spacing between the upper and lower branches is key here, and a good rule of thumb is to keep the branches about three feet apart on a mature tree.

It is essential to make clean cuts, so always use good-quality, sharp pruning shears, and for bigger cuts use sharp lopping shears and saws. Shears with two sharp sides (like scissors) are better than the types with one sharp and one blunt side.

The first thing to do is cut away all dead, broken, or diseased branches. Also cut out any wood that crosses over or crowds other branches.

Next, identify the central leader and prune other limbs that compete with it. Look the tree over and decide which branches you want to keep. Your goal is to keep more horizontal branches and less vertical branches.

Remove limbs that cause too much shading. Remember with a mature tree to choose two or three of

the oldest, larger branches on the tree for pruning. Take into account their position and whether a younger replacement branch is nearby. Often you'll see this choice is easy to make.

Remove suckers from around the tree base, and spindly shoots and water sprouts from along the limbs. Make your pruning cuts nearly, but not completely, flush with the branch, leaving no stubs (these can become hosts to rot and disease.) If you do make a pruning cut that is completely flush with the limb or the trunk, the wound will not heal as quickly.

If your task is pruning apple trees that have been neglected, do not prune severely, all at one time. Excessive pruning can be too much of a shock to the tree's system, so spread the work over two or

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three years.

What's the best teacher for pruning? Experience! Learn about pruning apple trees by following good, basic fruit tree pruning instructions, and you're bound to become a seasoned pro. A few wrong cuts will be many times better than no pruning at all.

Robert Mosse is a garden and lawn care specialist and author of the "Easy" Lawn and Gardening Book Series. Find out more about pruning apple trees

– and get Robert's free

Guide for 101 Gardening Tips.

The Secret To Pruning Apple Trees

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