

Fall Fruit Tree Care

Autumn is around the corner! It is time to consider best practices for care of your fruit trees. Understanding the special requirements for your fruit trees will ease planning for harvest, watering, fertilizing, fall pest prevention, and subsequent preparation for the winter dormant season. Many actions discussed for the fall will improve overall tree health including next year's harvest and pest resistance.

Fruit trees are often referred to by the groupings of pome, stone, nuts and miscellaneous. Apples, pears and quince are examples of pomes, which are defined as fleshy fruits with a leathery core. Stone fruits include apricots, cherries, nectarine, peaches, plums/prunes. Almonds are also stone fruit, but are often grouped in the nut family which includes chestnuts, filberts, pecans, pistachios and walnuts. Other types of fruits include avocado, olives, pomegranates, figs and persimmons. There are also cultivars, root stock and hybrids within these groupings which have been developed for specific traits such as resistance to certain soil borne fungi and suitability for temperate climates. This article will focus on pruning, harvesting and pest prevention with dormant sprays.

Annual pruning should at minimum, after leaf drop or the end of harvest, include removal of all dead or damaged wood and crossed branches. This will allow air circulation, sunlight penetration and branches rubbing and wounding the bark. Additionally, removal of a few of the older limbs gradually each year will result in the entire bearing surface to be renewed every 6 – 8 years, like getting a new tree! Always remove water sprouts emerging from branches immediately as they can weaken the tree and are not productive. Root suckers from the ground should also be removed promptly for similar reasons. Leaf litter and mummy (dried or shriveled) fruit should be removed to reduce disease and pests. Fall is also the time to assess that irrigation is properly located near the outer edge of the canopy and away from the trunk. Water and nutrients are taken up at the tip ends of the roots, not near the trunk. Also, watering too close to the trunk can weaken the bark and allow pest and diseases easy entry.

PRUNING FOR QUALITY FRUIT: Pruning is the task that is most often neglected, and can be most important for healthy trees and fruit. Fruit trees need sunshine! This means that your tree will need to be pruned every year to allow light to penetrate all parts of the tree. If the best and most plentiful fruit is only at the top of the tree, stand back and look at the overall density of branches and foliage. The areas of the tree where light cannot penetrate will not bear as much fruit. Proper pruning will result in more fruit, in easier to reach areas for picking! More sunlight also results in more colorful, flavorful, vitamin-enriched fruit. The sunlight and circulating air also prevent scab, mildew and other diseases that thrive when it is shady and humid.

For heavier fruit bearing trees such as apples and pears, the pruning style for garden trees is called modified leader. The modified leader follows more closely the natural way most fruit trees grow. The method for the central leader (trunk), more common for orchards, is to thin branches that opens space between limbs. Then, trim branches from the limbs remaining, and so on. This will allow the tree to reach full mature height, which also means there may be the need for ladders to pick the upper parts of the tree as the tree ages.

The modified leader method will ensure that fruit loads are heavier at the bottom of the tree where limbs are stronger. This also makes picking easier to reach the fruit. The method for modified leader trimming is to initially trim same as the central leader, but eventually you let the central trunk branch off as the tree matures to form several tops. Cut back the tops of taller growing trees as needed to keep the trees shorter and allow light penetration to lower branches.

Other ways to improve the quality of fruit is to remove surplus fruit if the tree sets heavily. If the set is heavy, the strength of the tree is depleted. While pruning can reduce heavy fruit set, some types of trees seem to bear heavily and you will want to thinned out. Often, the year following a heavy fruit set will be a lighter or very light year for fruit bearing. Thin so fruit is 6 inches apart.

Dormant sprays are normally applied to the bare, leafless tree in the winter when the trees are dormant and before the buds begin to swell. Delayed dormant controls are applied in the early spring when the buds begin to swell. These treatments will aid in reducing invertebrate pests and diseases like peach leaf curl. The treatments vary from type of tree and the pest or disease, and detailed information can be found at: <https://ipm.ucanr.edu/homegarden/dormant>

Here are tips for harvest, irrigation and fertilization for some of the most common fruit trees:

Apples: Harvest from July-November depending upon the fruit taste. After harvest, continue irrigating and fertilize mature trees at summer rates until leaf fall. Remove and destroy or compost leaves to prevent the spread of apple scab. Control weeds throughout the season with an organic mulch.

Apricots: Harvest when fruit begins to turn soft. During or after leaf fall, but before onset of winter rains, spray leaves with fixed copper (not sulfur) to reduce damage from shot hole fungus the following spring. Prune before onset of winter rains to prevent Eutypa fungus infection of pruning wounds. Remove about 20% of last year's growth to let light into the tree. Remove old, broken or diseased branches.

Cherries: Harvest when fruit is soft and sweet. Irrigation to maintain good tree vigor through summer heat and into fall until winter rain takes over. Drip irrigate daily to match daily use. Sprinkler irrigate to wet soil in root zone but stop Sept 1st to prevent root rot.

Figs: Many fig cultivars have two crops per year, one midsummer and then in the fall. Figs are fully ripe when they are soft and start to droop on their stems. They are ready for harvest when they can be removed from the tree easily if lifted and bent back toward the branch. Figs that are grown for drying are allowed to ripen fully then partially dry on the tree. As they begin to fall off, they may be harvested and dried completely on drying trays. Pick the fallen fruit up quickly, within a day or two, to avoid insect and disease problems. Fresh figs or figs for canning are harvested as soon as they become fully colored but still firm. If milky latex sap exudes from the cut stem end, the fruit is not fully ripe. Figs can be stored in cool temperatures

Olives: Harvest fruit for table use when the fruit is still green, just before the straw yellow stage. For oil, harvest when the fruit has turned black on the outside, but the flesh is still green/yellow. Continue irrigation right up to harvest if weather is dry; do not allow fruit to shrivel. Apply fixed copper to prevent peacock spot before first major fall rains. Wash copper off fruit prior to processing or apply after harvest.

Peaches and nectarines: Spray for shot hole fungus in November before first heavy rain; use fixed copper. Fertilize and irrigate just after harvest. At leaf fall, remove and destroy or compost leaves to prevent the spread of peach and apple scab. Remove mummies from tree.

Pear trees: Harvest as fruit soften and by flavor. Using spring rates, fertilize and irrigate mature trees right after harvest. Clean up fallen fruit to reduce codling moth infestation. Remove and destroy or compost leaves to prevent the spread of apple scab. Control weeds throughout the season with an organic mulch.

Plums and Prunes: Fertilize and irrigate trees just after harvest with 1–2 lb. urea or 20–40 lb. manure for mature trees. At leaf fall or before major rains, spray to prevent shot hole fungus with fixed copper.

Pomegranates: Harvest fruit during September as it ripens. Unharvested ripe fruit attracts ants and fruit flies.

Resources:

University of California Agriculture and Natural Resources (UCANR), https://homeorchard.ucanr.edu/Fruits_&_Nuts/. All information is compiled from UCANR scientifically based research. This website has more information for care in other seasons of the year. For pest identification and management in your home orchard, the UCANR Integrated Pest Management website is very detailed: <https://ipm.ucanr.edu/PMG/GARDEN/fruit.html>

Pruning Made Easy, A Gardener's Visual Guide to When and How to Prune Everything, from Flowers to Trees; Lewis Hill, Published by Storey Publishing 1997.

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Most flower buds of plums and prunes are formed on spurs



Plums and prunes are pruned to leave some year-old wood for production of fruit buds and to thin out lateral wood so new spurs will be produced



Before pruning



After pruning

