

# Deciduous Fruit Tree Planting & Pruning Tips

*A special thanks to our grower, Dave Wilson Nurseries, for providing this handout information.*

## ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY FOR TREE SIZE

Small trees yield crops of manageable size and are much easier to spray, thin, prune, net and harvest than large trees. If trees are kept small, it is possible to plant a greater number of trees in a given space, affording the opportunity for more kinds of fruit and a longer fruit season.

Most semi-dwarfing rootstocks do not control fruit tree size as much as most people expect. Rootstocks can help to improve fruit tree soil and climate adaptation, pest and disease resistance, precocity (heavier bearing in early years), longevity, and ease of propagation in the nursery.

Pruning is the only way to keep most fruit trees under twelve feet tall. A good height is the height you can reach for thinning and picking while standing on the ground or on a low stool. Pruning is most important in the first three years, because this is when the shape and size of a fruit tree is established.

Two other important influences on tree size are irrigation and fertilization practices. Fruit trees should not be grown with lots of nitrogen and lots of water. Some people grow their fruit trees the way they grow their lawn, then wonder why the trees are so big and don't have any fruit!

## TIPS FOR PLANTING YOUR TREES

When planting, be aware of air circulation. This is important for minimizing disease problems. Check drainage. If poor-draining soil is suspected, consider a raised bed to protect the trees from starving for oxygen when the soil is water-logged.

**To conserve water and stabilize soil moisture:** apply at least a 4-inch layer of mulch up to 4 feet around the base of the tree. Make sure the mulch is not touching the trunk and covering the root ball - the tree needs to breathe!

## UNDERSTAND THE REASONS AND SEASON FOR PRUNING

*It's much easier to keep a small tree small than it is to make a large tree small.* Most kinds of deciduous fruit trees require pruning to stimulate new fruiting wood, remove broken and diseased wood, space the fruiting wood and allow good air circulation and sunlight penetration in the canopy.

Pruning during the **SUMMER** at the same time as thinning the crop is strongly recommended. By pruning when there is fruit on the tree, the kind of wood on which the tree sets fruit (one year-old wood, two year-old wood, spurs, etc.) is apparent, which helps you to make better pruning decisions.

## TIPS FOR PRUNING

When planting a bareroot tree, cut side limbs back by at least two-thirds to promote vigorous new growth. Next, two or three times per year, **cut back or remove limbs and branches to accomplish the following:**

### FIRST YEAR

**At planting time, most bare root trees may be topped** as low as 15 inches above the ground to force very low scaffold limbs or, alternatively, trees may be topped higher than 15 inches (up to four feet) depending on the presence of well-spaced side limbs or desired tree form. After the spring flush of growth cut the new growth back by half (late April/early May). In late summer (late August to mid-September) cut the subsequent growth back by half. Size control and development of low fruiting wood begin in the first year.



# Deciduous Fruit Tree Planting & Pruning Tips (cont'd)

The main exceptions to the low-cut recommendation above are large caliper bare root peach and nectarine trees (3/4" up), which sometimes do not push new limbs from low on the trunk. Especially when these trees are not fully dormant, they should be topped higher initially, just above any existing lower limbs or at about 28 inches if no lower limbs are present. Once new growth has begun, height may be reduced further.

## SECOND YEAR

Cut back new growth by half in spring and late summer, same as the first year. Pruning three times may be the easiest way to manage some vigorous varieties: spring, early summer and late summer. Remove broken limbs. Remove diseased limbs by cutting them well below signs of disease.

Single-tree plantings: prune to vase shape (open center, no central leader). See diagram below.

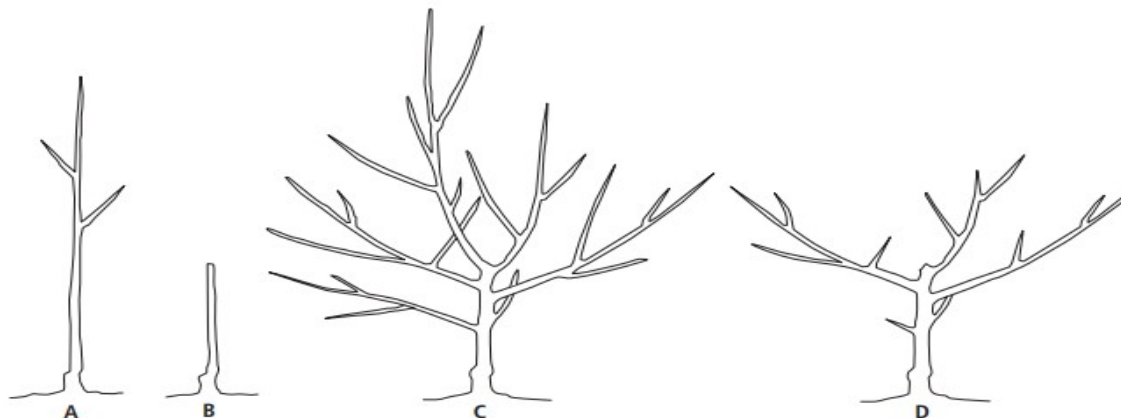


Figure 1. Open center pruning method. (A) Bare root tree at planting time. (B) Tree headed after planting. (C) Growth after one season. (D) Tree pruned after one growing season.

## THIRD YEAR

**Choose a height and don't let the tree grow any taller. Tree height is the decision of the pruner.** Whenever there are vigorous shoots above the chosen height, cut back or remove them. Each year, in late spring/early summer, cut back all new growth by at least half.

The smaller one-, two-, and three-year-old branches that bear the fruit should have *at least six inches* of free space all around. This means that where two branches begin close together and grow in the same direction, one should be removed. When limbs cross one another, one or both should be cut back or removed.

When removing large limbs, first saw part way through the limb on the under side ahead of your intended cut. Do this so it won't tear the trunk as it comes off. Also, don't make the final cut flush with the trunk or parent limb; be sure to leave a collar (a short stub).

Apricots will require more pruning in the summer to control height. Prune as needed (2 to 3 times in the summer) to remove excessive growth. Be careful not to cut too much at one time, as this might cause excess sun exposure and sunburn to the unprotected interior limbs.

Don't let pruning decisions inhibit you or slow you down. There are always multiple acceptable decisions - no two people will prune a tree in the same way. **You learn to prune by pruning!**

**For more information on fruit trees and backyard orchard culture, visit [www.davewilson.com](http://www.davewilson.com) or the University of California Backyard Orchard at [homeorchard.ucanr.edu](http://homeorchard.ucanr.edu)**

