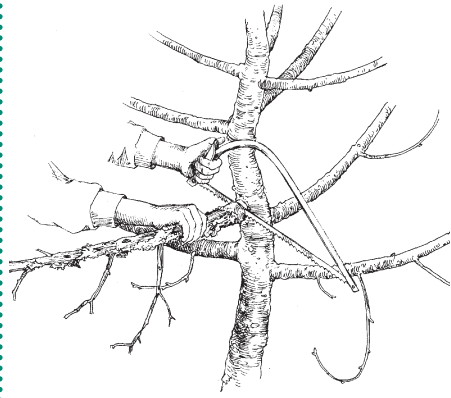


# Pruning a Fruit Tree



**A** fruit tree that has reached its mature size and is yielding fruit requires regular pruning. Such maintenance keeps the tree healthy and within its allotted space and opens its branches to sunlight so that they stay productive. Although you'll remove some fruit buds and, hence, potential fruits as you prune, the quality of those that remain will be better. In addition, pruning maintains a balance between fruiting and nonfruiting growth.

After you prune, the tree will respond with a flush of leafy shoots that provide new bearing wood and nourish developing fruits. How much you cut depends on the type of tree. Trees that flower on year-old wood, such as peaches, benefit from a more severe pruning than trees that flower on old wood, such as apples and pears.

## 1 remove dead, broken & diseased branches

The best time to prune a tree is from the time it goes dormant until its blossoms open in the spring. When winters are severely cold, wait until after mid-winter. Depending on the size of the branch, make your cuts with sharp pruning shears, loppers, or a pruning saw.

Always begin by cutting back all dead or broken branches to the trunk or to healthy buds. In addition to being unsightly, such branches provide an entryway for disease.

Next, check twigs or branches for telltale evidence of disease, such as dark, sunken lesions or the black specks of fungal spores. Cut off infected wood a half-foot back from the diseased area.

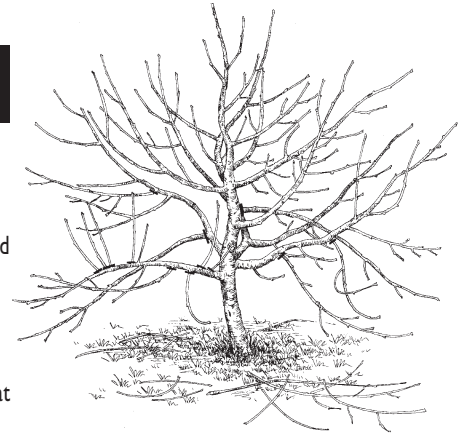
## 2 cut large branches

As a tree ages, the highest branches tend to grow most vigorously, shading the lower ones. With time, a tree also may grow out of bounds in height or spread. Periodically removing some large limbs will both contain your tree and open it to light. Remove large limbs at their origin or shorten them back to small, healthy side branches. Sawing off a large limb can be tricky. Keep the job safe and neat by first shortening the branch to about a foot. To avoid stripping the bark, undercut the branch slightly before sawing it from above. Then saw off the stub, leaving a slight collar to promote good healing. It is not necessary to use a wound sealant.

## 3 remove less productive wood

The best fruiting wood on an apple tree is moderately vigorous wood that grows horizontally from the major limbs. Therefore, you need to take out any water sprouts, or suckers—overly vigorous, vertical branches that produce only a few, poor-quality fruits and shade the interior of the tree. Remove them at their bases. If the tree has been neglected for many seasons and there are many water sprouts, don't remove all of them in one season or the interior of your tree will be susceptible to sunscald.

Branches that droop downward tend to be too weak for good fruiting. If they're still young, shorten them to stimulate growth from buds just below the cuts. If they are old, shorten them to side branches growing in near-horizontal positions. Finally, remove any twiggy branches growing from the undersides of limbs, as these are particularly weak.



## 4 thinning spurs

Apples and pears bear most of their fruit on long-lived spurs—fat, stubby growths that elongate less than an inch per year. With age, these become weak and overcrowded. Invigorate individual spurs by cutting them back to strong buds. If they are crowded, remove a few so that fruit will be evenly distributed, but not crammed, along the branches. (This step does not apply to other fruit trees.)

