

Pruning for Fruit Production

1. The Basics of How to Prune

- **Making proper cuts:** Always make “clean” cuts, 45 degrees on branches, no “stubs” allowed!
- **Types of Pruning:** Pinching, Shearing, Thinning, Heading Back. Learn which plants respond to which type of pruning, and the proper techniques for each.
- **Use the right tool for the right job and keep ‘em sharp!** Look at options for pruning tools – snips, bypass pruners, ratchet pruners, small folding saws, loppers, shears, pole pruners, and others. Utilize a great sharpening tool to keep them sharp and make the job easier!

2. Why prune? Have a purpose!

- **Increase fruiting/flowering for the future:** Maximize production of blooms, fruit, berries, etc. by pruning the right way at the right time of year.
- **Improve shape/structure:** This can be done with some thinning and/or heading back by removing crossing limbs and evening out branching. Let the plant attain its natural beauty in the landscape.
- **Improve air circulation/decrease disease:** Let sun/wind into the center of plant to improve air movement with thinning cuts. This will cut down disease potential, particularly on prone plants like roses and others.
- **No one says you have to prune everything every year.** To prune or not to prune – that is the question! Let your specimen tell you when it needs a prune. Is it too big? Blocking a view? Burying the garage? Obstructing other plants from growing? Casting too much shade? Growing onto the lawn? Crowding a fence or siding on the house? On the gutters or roof? There are lots of good reasons to contemplate pruning, but you don’t necessarily have to prune everything every year in the landscape.

3. Know your plants in your landscape

- **Watch for disease/winter damage:** Was the plant healthy the past growing season? Is there damage from a windstorm? Breakage from snow? You can always remove dead/diseased limbs at any time all year long.
- **Prune after bloom – always a good rule to live by.** Knowing when your plants bloom is key. Does your specimen bloom on new wood or old wood? Ask if you do not know. A few examples – Hydrangea (new or old wood), Spiraea (new wood), Rhododendrons (old wood), Dogwood (old wood), Magnolia (old wood). Remember if you cut back an old wood bloomer in winter, plant will not suffer but there will be minimal flowers to enjoy.
- **The 1/3 rule – never cutting more than 1/3 of a plant in a season is safe.** Many of us break this one on occasion and with some plants, more than a third is okay. But you are always safe cutting a 1/3 in height and/or width with deciduous plants. With evergreens, we need to be a bit more careful. Rarely will an evergreen plant bounce back if you cut into bare wood!
- **Put the right plant in the right spot, then you won’t have to prune as much!** When selecting plants for your landscape, look at ultimate size and growth habit – does it fit the spot? Do you need a dwarf variety instead? Also consider, can this plant be pruned easily and... will you take the time to do it? Some plants, like boxwood or laurel, can take annual shearing, but they can’t be left alone for 5 years and then cut back to the original size.

4. Pruning of Spur Fruits (apples and pears)

Spur type fruits should be pruned each season, perhaps even twice a season, to maintain manageable size and maximize production. Be sure to learn what the types of buds look like on these trees – most importantly what a spur looks like. Spurs are what give us fruit – pruning improperly/removing them will greatly reduce or eliminate your crop! Keep in mind spur fruits are essentially a three year process – new growth happens one year – the next year spurs are produced on that growth – and the third year they blossom and you pick the fruit developed on these spurs.

- Always prune to lateral buds to encourage a lower spreading tree that is easier to pick.
- In late winter thin out trees, removing any dead or diseased wood, opening up structure for more light and air circulation.
- Look at “suckers” or “water sprouts” that shoot up every season – especially when you prune heavy. Don’t just remove them all – pick some to keep and cut down leaving 3 to 4 buds on shorter branches. This leaves wood to develop spurs that season for future production.
- Remember to sacrifice on younger trees – prune them harder to develop branching and attain better structure and smaller size with age.
- Make yourself a note to look at these same spur type fruit trees in mid-summer. This is a great time to cut back long suckers and water sprouts as well – same as described above. And the weather is a little more pleasant than in January/February ☺
- Have Espaliers? These are pruned following the same principles but typically you are not allowing anything to grow vertically, just allowing horizontal growth with training.
- Battling an old tree that has not been pruned since who knows when? Really cut it back following these principles, perhaps sacrificing production for a year or two and allowing tree to regain shape and vigor long term.

5. Pruning of Stone Fruits (cherries, plums, apricots, nectarines, peaches)

These types of fruits should be pruned at least once a season as well to maintain desired size and maximize production. What is different than spur types listed above? It is easier to some degree as they bloom and produce on last year’s growth. Think of it this way, they bloom early spring and begin producing that season’s crop on one year old wood. Thus the new growth that occurs during current growing season will set flower buds that open the next year. Be careful in winter not to just cut these trees back hard – if you cut most of last year’s growth off that means minimal fruit for you the next summer. Again, know your buds – it is easy to spot the wood that is full of flower buds and ready to rock, leave them/most of them to increase your bounty!

- In late winter look to remove dead/diseased wood, open up structure for better air circulation and sun – this means less disease for home gardeners. This is a great time for thinning type cuts on stone fruits.
- During the early summer manage to size a bit more by cutting back long shoots and thinning tree if needed. This is typically a better time for heading back cuts to control height. Long upright shoots at least 3’ tall should be cut back at least a third to create side branching and maximize bloom potential for the next year.
- Always prune to lateral buds to encourage lower, spreading, easier to pick fruit tree.
- Remember to sacrifice on younger trees for long term shape and prune hard.

- With peaches, nectarines and apricots in particular remember even the most disease resistant varieties are still prone to issues in our wet winter/spring weather. Infections typically start in the tip or apical buds and thus it is always a good idea to prune back about 20% in length of all these branches and spray with copper fungicide in February. This way your chances of breaking dormancy from healthy buds is greatly increased and tip dieback is somewhat eliminated.

6. *Pruning of Berries*

- **Blueberries** — In late winter is an ideal time to remove old wood from blueberries. Again understand that all bloom (and thus production) occurs on one year old wood. So shearing them back is never ideal. Picking some of old wood out to remove all the way to crown is the way to go. This opens up structure for air and sun and promotes more suckering at base – which means fresh branching to develop new buds for picking again the next year. This can also be accomplished after picking time in mid-summer. With more “evergreen” varieties out in the PNW these days, try and get these after frost, being careful not to cut too much of the blooming wood off. Other option on these evergreen ones is to prune them in mid-summer after picking as well.
- **Raspberries** — First of all, confirm the variety you have as June bearing or ever bearing type Raspberry – pruning and timing will differ on these. If you have June bearing – all production comes from old canes from previous seasons. So cutting these way back in winter means minimal berries to enjoy. Some of height can certainly be cut back, and some canes cut off at ground level to open rows up. This will also encourage fresh growth of roots for future picking. If you are going to cut June bearing back hard, do this right after picking in early summer. If you have ever bearing – the old canes give you berries in June (like above), and the growth that occurs in spring/early summer gives you the second crop late summer/fall. So same principles apply as above, just remember this difference in the old wood/new wood. Cut them back hard late winter and you will sacrifice some of June crop. Cut them back hard in summer and you will sacrifice some of the late crop. Try thinning these in winter as described above, and thinning again after June picking leaving most of new growth to produce more berries in late summer/fall.
- **Brambles** — From gourmet blackberries to marionberries to boysenberries to tayberries and many more – these are all covered by following the floricanes/primocane principles. Floricanes are the wood produced the previous season and will flower and produce. Primocanes are current wood and will be good for the next year’s production. All of the wood on these brambles are good for two years and then should be removed to keep fresh canes coming off crown. In late winter/early spring remove any floricanes (wood that produced berries the previous season) at ground level for starters. The primocanes that will produce the coming season should be tipped back but NOT cut out or minimal berries that year. Brambles can be a little messy – doing this pruning will greatly improve your rows for sure! Strap on some body armor and thick gloves and off you go ☺
- **Grapes** — Grapes of all kinds can be pruned late winter to keep them manageable in size. Most all of the stringy small vines should be removed, and the thicker old wood kept for grape production that season. Grapes produce on old wood only. Thinning out rows and removing some growth to increase sun and air flow is always a good idea. Grapes grow fast and rejuvenate quickly – don’t be bashful! Pruning out everything not thicker than a pencil is great to start. Cutting back older wood leaving 3-4 buds on side branches at most is another good goal. Think vineyard – prune for production if that is what you want. If you are trying to grow them large and cover something let them go more and live with a little less grapes and more wood/foilage.

- **Kiwi** – Kiwis are all old wood producers. Late winter/early spring is a great time to tame them with both thinning cuts and heading back cuts. They grow vigorously and will recover quickly. Be sure to do this closer to last frost and some kiwis are marginally hardy (especially fuzzy ones) and pruning to early may cause some damage to wood if we are cold late winter. All kinds of kiwi bloom on old wood and like grapes, removing anything skinnier than a pencil is ideal. Don't be shy about removing some old wood here and there to thin the vine out and increase sun and air circulation. These grow extremely rapidly and will recover.
- **Currants** – In late winter these should be cut back fairly hard to encourage vigor and production for the coming season. Prune down old wood to a single bud on stems, reducing some height. All lower branches that hang over and come close to ground should be removed as base to keep upright as well. Keep in mind currants bloom/fruit on one year old, so don't cut the plant all the way back! In summer look at all the new growth after picking – cutting any long shoots back to a couple buds here and there will help keep the plant lower and bushier. These plants are always a little twiggy – do your best to follow the simple pruning principles – removing weak/diseased wood, crossing branches and keep tidy.
- **Huckleberries** – Red (deciduous) Huckleberries bloom/produce on one year old wood, so winter pruning is not ideal. Exception will be structure pruning – crossing limbs, weak or dead wood – that kind of thing. Pruning them back should only be down after picking berries in early summer – this will encourage healthy new growth and maximize potential for the coming season. With evergreen type Huckleberries, these will bloom/produce on new growth so you have a couple options. If the berries are not desired and you want the foliage to harvest, cut them back hard almost to the ground in early spring. If you want the berries, either prune the branches back after picking in summer, or wait until early spring and cut long sprays back a bit to encourage new growth and production. Shearing them back is OK in landscape, but will eliminate some berry production.

7. After pruning, protect your specimens with a dormant spray application

- Apply a combination of Liquicop and Horticultural Oil to protect against diseases and to eradicate any bug issues over the winter. This will help ensure you start the next season clean.
- Had any issues with fruit/berries in 2023 growing season? Be sure to apply dormant spray to help start 2024 healthy, then utilize a natural orchard spray to maintain health, especially in wet spring weather. Try the Orchard Spray from Bonide – all natural and helps with bugs and diseases.
- **Liquicop** lasts for 30 days in rain, but apply on a dry day so it can stick first. This is a great natural disease preventer, and it can be used during growing season as well to control diseases. Always read the label for instructions!
- **Horticultural Oil** is OMRI certified and makes a great dormant spray. Apply on a dry day and it can be mixed directly with Liquicop in the same sprayer for one application of both. The oil will coat branches/twigs/etc. and smother overwintering insect eggs and larvae. It can be used in the growing season as well. Always read the label for instructions!