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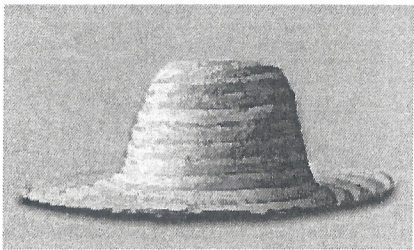
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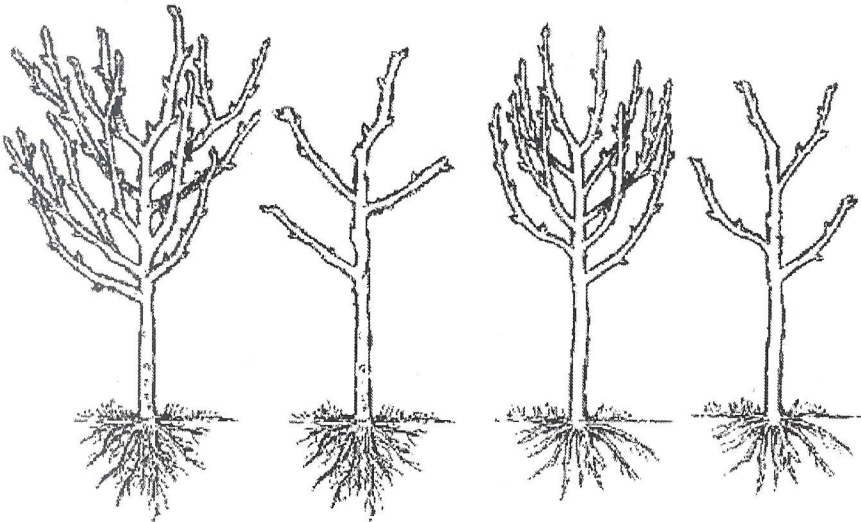


Starting Your Own Home Orchard

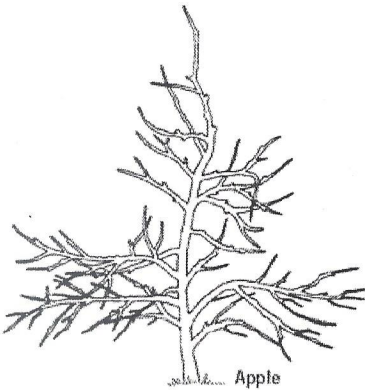
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Pruning Diagram

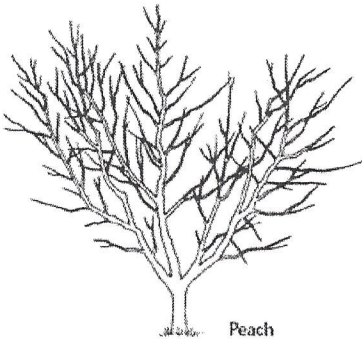
Young Form Before and After



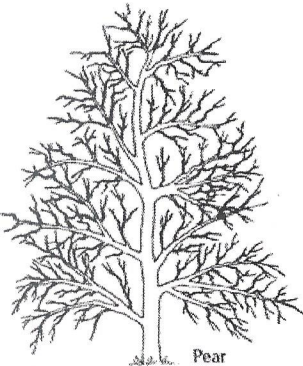
Mature Tree Forms



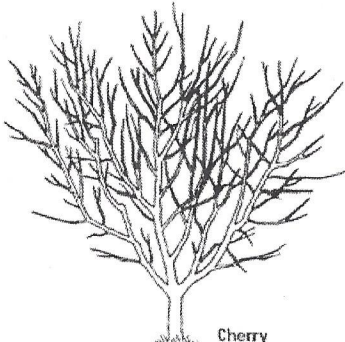
Apple



Peach



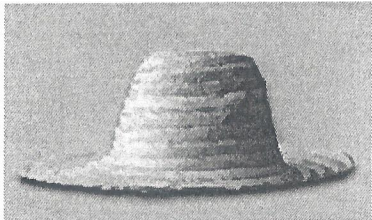
Pear



Cherry

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Home Orcharding

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Pruning and Thinning

We can not stress enough the importance of regular, annual, aggressive pruning. It is essential to maintain the ongoing vigor of the tree and to maximize the production of fruit.

First year pruning sets the eventual shape of the tree. If your tree is taller than 4-6' above ground, after it's planted, trim it down to that height. Thin out the inward growing branches and any branches which are crossing over each other. Trim off the tips of the larger branches to encourage growth. See the illustration below for a before and after look at the branches.

Any shoots or branches which come from BELOW the "bud union" should always be pruned - now and in the future. Brand new stems that grow out of the ground, from the root systems are called suckers. If you see them, simply cut them off at ground level. When the tree matures, suckering usually diminishes.

If your trees set fruit this first year, pick off some of the immature fruits, spacing them about 8" apart on the branches. This will encourage proper ripening, allow the spray to cover well, and improve vegetative vigor. Fruit thinning in the future is also important for the very same reasons. Less is more. If you don't thin, you will get many more fruits than the tree can handle, resulting in broken branches and small fruits. So don't be afraid to thin. The resulting fruits will be fuller and much nicer.

In later years, it is helpful to "shape" your tree. Apple, pear and cherry trees are best trained to a central leader (uppermost upright limb). Peach, nectarine, plum and apricot trees should be trained to a vase shape (no central leader). See the drawings below which show what your mature tree should look like. As you prune, bear this shape in mind and prune accordingly. Don't be shy; it's really hard to overprune a fruit tree.

When to Prune

Apples and Pears - It is generally best to prune apples and pears when they are dormant. So pick a nice pleasant, sunny winter day and enjoy this part of orcharding. Summer pruning is helpful to retard growth of the tree. So if the tree is growing very aggressively and getting taller than you like, take it back in July to control this growth.

Cherries - It is generally best to prune cherry trees when the weather is hot. Do not prune in the winter or late fall or early spring. Bacterial diseases are present in all non-arid environments and are particularly detrimental to sweet cherries. These bacteria are most active in cool, wet weather. So wait until the tree has leafed out and the warm late spring weather patterns are well established - usually by the end of May - to prune your cherry trees.

Peaches, Nectarines and Apricots - The best time to prune peaches, nectarines and apricots is in the early spring. Try pruning after the last frost date for your area. At this time, most of the winter damage can be trimmed off and you will minimize the effect of late frost damage to your buds and blooms.

Plums - As plums are very vigorous growers, you will want to prune aggressively. Bear in mind that summer pruning, when the trees is still growing, will help contain the spreading nature of your plum tree. You cannot over-prune a plum tree. So do clean up pruning in the winter, to get rid of broken and dead branches and shape up the tree. Then in July, prune again to maintain a manageable size.

Go to the appropriate page for each fruit type (apple, peaches, pears, etc.) to see more detailed instructions.

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Frequently Asked Questions

How can I figure out what variety of apple will pollinate an old apple tree in my yard? I don't know what variety it is.

Go to a garden center when your tree is flowering and select an apple variety that is blooming at the same time. Don't pick a pollen sterile variety.

Why is my fruit so small at harvest time?

You need to thin the fruit when it is young, so pick off about half of the immature fruit just after they begin to form.

Why don't I get many figs from my fig tree?

Figs need a lot of light and heat. Make sure they are planted in a sunny location and prune aggressively in the late winter to allow sunlight into the tree.

Can two trees of the same variety pollinate one another?

No, you need a tree of the same fruit type, but a different variety that has a similar bloom time and viable pollen. See our page "Fruit Tree Varieties" for more detailed information.

How close do the trees have to be to pollinate one another?

Your pollinator trees can be anywhere in your yard to provide pollination. In fact, if you can see your pollinating tree it is probably close enough. If your neighbor has the proper tree it will pollinate yours. To be sure it is best to plant your own trees that will cross pollinate.

What is the best time of the year to plant fruit trees?

You can plant container grown fruit trees any time of the year, except when the ground is frozen. Early Spring and Fall are the best times. After planting be sure to water thoroughly and regularly.

How do I keep the deer from destroying my fruit trees?

Attach to each tree, one unwrapped (motel sized) bar of soap to each tree early in the spring before the trees leaf out and then again in October before the bucks start to rub on the trees. Drill a hole in the soap and hang on the trees with a loop of string or a twist tie.

Are dwarf trees less cold tolerant than standards?

The hardiness of a fruit tree is principally determined by the variety of the specific fruit itself. Whether it is dwarf or standard is not important in Zones 4-8.

Do dwarf trees produce full sized fruit and how big do they get?

Dwarf trees do product full sized fruit. The mature size of dwarf trees, with proper pruning, will average about 8 to 10' high and 12 or 14' in breadth. Dwarf trees are preferable for several reasons. First, they are easier to maintain in terms of the height and breadth of the tree. Plus they are a more economical use of space. Many commercial orchards plant dwarf trees because they can pack more trees in per acre and get more fruit per acre. 2 or 3 dwarf trees can fit in the space necessary for a standard tree.

If it rains the day after I spray, do I have to spray again?

If your spray has been on the tree for 12 hours before it rains, the spray will have done its work. Otherwise, you will need to spray again.

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