

Careful training in early years may be wise advice for parents of young children; it's a good hint for gardeners planting fruit trees, too. Proper pruning and training yield quality fruit and a longer-lasting tree. Follow these basic procedures when shaping trees:

Whenever you use pruning shears, make sure edges are sharp and tools are in good working order. Nothing is more conducive to disease than a tree with mangled stumps caused by dull pruning shears. In removing a branch, make the cut close to and parallel with the supporting limb.

Reserve pruning for late winter or early spring when fruit trees are still dormant and sap has not begun to move. At that time, wounds heal best and flower buds can be easily located.

Remember that a wide-angled branch is stronger and healthier than a branch with a narrow crotch. Instead of cutting off branches to produce this wide angle, spread the branches to help produce fruit earlier and, at the same time, improve the tree's form. Bend branches growing upright down to a 45-degree angle, and hold them there with a brace for at least a year. The more horizontal branch has healthier fruit along its entire length than an upright one because of vigor and even distribution of light.

Make cuts just above a strong outwardly growing lateral branch. Take care not to leave a stub; it can become diseased.

Fruit with poor color is a clue pruning is needed. Remove branches that are severely shaded and will bear few spurs (the short, woody, fruit-bearing stems).

As a general rule, promote healing by treating wounds larger than two inches in diameter with a coat of paint especially made for this purpose; it's available from nurseries and garden supply centers. Smaller cuts will heal nicely by themselves.

Three training methods get best results:

### **Central leader system**

Sometimes referred to as the pyramid form, the central leader system means a single central trunk is allowed to predominate while lateral or scaffold branches develop at regular intervals. Trees tend to withstand heavy weather and heavy fruit. Thin annually, so the center of the tree gets good light.

### **Open center system**

A central leader does not dominate. Three or four main limbs of similar size are encouraged to grow at wide angles. In turn, these branch outward with six or so secondary limbs. Peach, nectarine, apricot, plum, and sour cherry are adaptable to this system.

### **Modified central leader system**

The central leader and scaffold or lateral branches are equally important in the modified central leader method. If branched one- or two-year-old trees are planted, then pruning involves

selecting three or four widely spaced, wide-angled branches and removing the rest. The leader or any scaffold branch should not be allowed to dominate for the first two years.