

# PROPER FRUIT TREE MAINTENANCE TECHNIQUES



What could be more exciting than a fruit orchard right in your own garden? If you're hoping to have a bountiful harvest, there are a few things you need to know about managing fruit trees. **Pruning, training, and thinning** are all important parts of your new garden/orchard vocabulary. Also, the better you care for your trees now, the less you'll have to worry about them in 3-5 years, as they begin producing fruit. Proper early tree care will leave you more time to make peach jam and apple pie during future harvest seasons. Just follow these steps and with time, you'll have more fruit than you'll know what to do with!

## **Initial Care and Maintenance:** (Beginning as soon as planted)

Once your fruit tree is in the ground, you can pride yourself on having completed the initial steps towards growing a tree! You can start planning your weekly and monthly tree maintenance. In the beginning, you'll need to water your fruit trees with one 5-gallon bucket of water per tree per week. If you are getting weeds at the base of your trees, you should clean these up at least once a month to prevent your tree from having to compete for nutrient needs.

## **Ongoing Care and Maintenance** (Years 1-3 after planting)

Once your trees are in the ground and on their way to adulthood, there are a few things you should keep up with on a yearly basis: applying wood-chips at the base of your trees, whether or not you have planted a cover crop, will help prevent weeds. Adding compost to the base of your trees once a year will give them a nutrient boost. Collecting fallen fruit at the end of each season is important in preventing pests and diseases. Pruning in the spring is essential to healthy growth. In your tree's second and third year, you will also want to begin training the trees' branches and thinning the trees' fruit once every growing season.

## **Pruning** (Early spring—March/April—before buds break open)

Pruning is the shaping of trees in order to prepare them to bear the weight of fruit. It is best done from the early stages of tree growth, when the branches are most flexible. When pruning, you first work to shape the frame of the tree (we will use the central leader method, meaning there will be one central branch off which the other branches grow), then create a scaffold with the branches (think of an evergreen tree, with layers of branches that attach to the trunk at 90 degree angles), and lastly we will consider the fruit and the light and air it needs to grow: (this means pruning the tree to allow light to reach inner branches, and to make enough space between branches to allow for airflow).

Tools for pruning include: sharp pruning knife with a curved blade, fine toothed pruning saw, strong hand pruners and loppers. **Keep your tools sharp and clean to prevent spread of diseases!**



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## Two Kinds of Pruning cuts:

**Thinning cut:** cut at the meeting with another branch, removes crowded/undesirable branches.

**Heading cut:** cut across the branch away from branch union, promotes vigorous growth.

These two different cuts achieve different goals. When thinning the tree, shaping the frame, and cutting unnecessary branches, you will use the thinning cut, cutting as flat and as close to the parent branch as possible to promote fast healing. If you are hoping to promote vigorous growth in a certain area, use the heading cut.



Heading and thinning cuts

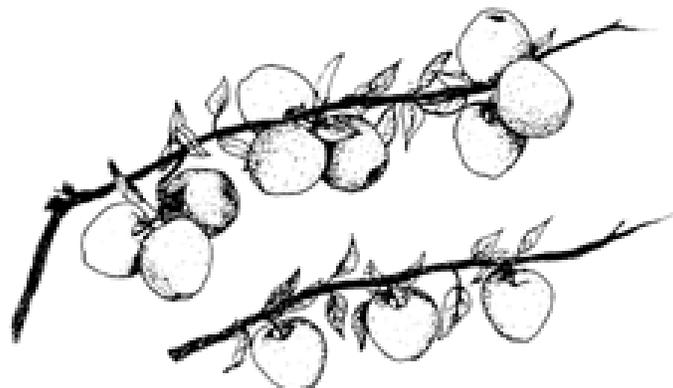
*Heading and thinning cuts have different effects on subsequent growth.*

## Training (As needed)

Besides pruning, we often need to train our trees to grow in the right direction. We want to encourage lateral branching on our trees (remember the evergreen example, we're looking for a wide base, a narrow top, and 90 degree branch angles) and sometimes young trees need a bit of encouragement. This helps promote a strong frame, and provides for light and air flow. A good general spacing rule is that you should be able to throw a football through the space between branches. For young trees, you can use clothespins to keep the branches growing laterally (see picture). For older trees, you may need to stake branches down using loosely tied ropes and stakes pounded into the ground at sharp angles.

## Fruit Thinning

If you want healthy, delicious fruits, you should consider thinning the fruits on your tree. It is time consuming but the resulting fruit makes it worth your while. In the early summer, when your trees buds have begun to mature into young fruits, go through and pick off all the undesirable/unhealthy fruits. You should leave only 2-3 fruits in each cluster (bunch/grouping). This will allow your tree to send all its energy to developing the most desirable fruits.



Top branch shows apple tree before thinning

Lower branch shows thinned apple tree branch

