

MANAGING YOUR BACKYARD FRUIT TREES

BY ANN RALPH

When backyard gardeners plant fruit trees we have different motivations than farmers do. We want fruit to share with our friends and family and we want fruit that tastes like fruit. We'd like fruit grown without chemicals and pesticides. But most of all we want that most simple and elemental domestic satisfaction—the singular pleasure of harvesting and eating tree-ripe fruit we've grown ourselves.

Yet when most of us think of a fruit tree we think of the classic vase-shaped orchard-style tree. Tree size and spacing accommodates farm machinery. An open center allows light to reach all the branches when a tree is shaded by the orchard around it. These cultivation practices were developed during the Industrial Revolution to promote maximum size for maximum yield, and indeed, farmers need yield—their livelihoods depend upon it.

When home gardeners borrow pruning tactics from farmers they get more than they bargained for, namely, outsized trees and impossible quantities of fruit. Most backyard fruit tree growers don't have the space orchard trees require and, even if they do, the work required with large trees, from pruning to harvest, can overwhelm even the most dedicated family orchardist.

One of the best reasons to keep a fruit tree small is because big trees are so hard to care for. The routine maintenance of fruit tree

growing—pruning, fruit thinning, pest and disease control, and harvesting—all become manageable with a tree that is only as tall as you are.

The semidwarfing rootstock available in most nurseries is a misnomer: it rarely controls tree size the way people expect. Semidwarf means only “smaller than standard.” If a full-sized tree is 30 feet high, a semidwarf might grow as tall as 25 feet. Genetic dwarf trees will stay small, but they don't offer much in the way of choice varieties—there is no such thing as a dwarf Blenheim apricot—and their small root systems tend to compromise the health and longevity of the tree. Whatever their dwarfing properties, rootstocks are best chosen for suitability to soil, situation, and climate.

Pruning is the best way to keep a fruit tree small. Fortunately for weekend gardeners there is little that is complicated about it. Europeans have been keeping fruit trees within bounds for centuries. All a gardener needs for a six-foot fruit tree is a sunny plot of earth and the wherewithal to prune whatever grows out of reach.

Bareroot fruit tree season falls between January and March. There is more than just a price advantage with bareroot planting. Roots that grow directly into native soils establish more easily than container plants do.

Most importantly, planting bare-root gives you a one-time-only opportunity to make the low pruning cut that establishes the basic structural

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Photograph courtesy of Berkeley Horticultural Nursery, illustration by J. Panter

FOG AND FUJIS

The cool summers and mild winters of our East Bay climate can be challenging for deciduous fruit trees. Microclimates allow the odd cherry tree to thrive in Albany, but in general, the foggier your neighborhood the more limited your choices. Apples, figs, and plums produce reliably almost everywhere. Apricots, pluots, and even nectarines can grow in circumstances that maximize winter chill and summer heat. Local independent nurseries carry varieties that are appropriate for the East Bay, so don't worry too much about it. Experiment if you are so inclined. Trees planted by people who didn't know not to can do surprisingly well.

The quality of store-bought fruit is not a reliable indicator of the quality of the variety. Golden Delicious apples really are delicious if you grow them yourself. Yellow Newtown Pippins show up in markets in September when they're still green. Nor are heirlooms necessarily worth growing just because they're heirlooms: try them first. Modern apples like Braeburn and Pink Lady don't object to our climate and have exceptional flavor. Any homegrown Fuji will be startlingly tastier than any Fuji you ever got from the store.

framework of the tree; you get to put the scaffold exactly where you want it. Prune the freshly planted young tree to at least knee high as it stands in the ground. This cut seems radical, but an initial hard prune creates a low branching scaffold that puts the body of the tree in front of the gardener.

Fruit tree pruning, and any pruning, really, is less of a technology than it is an exercise in "call and response": You prune, the tree answers, you prune again. Prune in winter and the tree will respond with the full force of its stored reserves. Stone fruits like plums can put on eight feet of growth in a single season. Prune lightly in winter. Make aesthetic decisions. Prune only to enhance the natural grace of the tree.

Trees pruned in summer regrow at a moderated rate. Prune in summer for size control. In May or early June remove as much as two thirds from upright growing branches. Prune a fruit tree the way you prune a rose bush: prune above outside buds to encourage spreading, uncrowded limbs.

"If you don't know what to do, cut some stuff out." This, from a UC Davis extension course on fruit tree pruning, is the best advice I ever heard for stymied and uncertain pruners on the topic of fruit tree pruning. The implications are obvious, the first being that it's hard to make a mistake. Secondly, if you decide you have made a mistake, it's correctable later on. It's better to make your best guess than to be so paralyzed by the idea of proper technique that you prune timidly or not at all. Perhaps most importantly, this advice trusts the native intelligence of the pruner. We are more capable than we give ourselves credit for.

Experienced pruners will tell you that pruning is more of an art than a science. Experienced pruners will also tell you they learned to prune by pruning. A few well-placed aesthetic cuts in January, followed by rigorous scaling back in May or June will keep your fruit tree invigorated, short, well-formed and fruitful.

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