Basic Fruit Tree Pruning

There is a lot of information on pruning fruit trees, especially on the Internet (I looked-WOW). Most of the information is too complicated, even for us. So, we will make an attempt to uncomplicated this subject.

If you are going to harvest good fruit, your trees need to be shaped, thinned, and opened up for good air circulation. Not all fruit trees need yearly pruning. Apples, cherries, pears, and plums are pruned only for structure, shape or to thin out crossing or rubbing branches. Peaches, because they bear fruit on year old wood, need yearly pruning to remove some older branches and encourage lots of new growth.

What happens if you don’t prune? You will start to notice a decrease in fruit size and yield, an increase in disease, an increase in branch density, which means the fruit won’t ripen properly, and a general decline in the trees health.

So, let’s get started. What tools do you need? Just a good pair of by-pass pruners, a looper, and a good pruning saw.

Before we discuss each method, here are some basic tree pruning instructions that apply no matter what method is used.

1. Always use sharp shears or saws.
2. Begin by removing dead wood and broken branches. Then cut out any wood that crosses or rubs another branch.
3. Make your cuts close to a bud, to a joint, or to the trunk. Never leave a stub. The cut should be just above a bud.
4. Prune stems just above a pair of opposing strong shoots or buds.
5. Keep more horizontal branches and prune more vertical branches.
6. Remove suckers from around the base of the tree.

There are different instructions for different fruit trees. For instance, apple trees need a
different pruning method than peach trees.

Central leader method
This is used for apples, pears, and sweet cherries. A central leader is the main stem or trunk of the tree from which other lateral branches develop.

Modified leader method
Easier to maintain because most fruit trees naturally grow this way.

Open (Vase) Center method
Used for peaches and sour cherries. This system is based around three or four main limbs set at wide angles.

So, let’s discuss each method in a little more detail.

Central leader:
Potted fruit trees do not need to be pruned the first year. So, the second spring after planting, begin training. Thin out the branches from the central leader as necessary to allow open space between limbs. Also, thin the branches that come from these limbs, and so on, out to the outermost branches. Eventually, you will have to cut out the top on the tall central leader. The next year (the third spring), prune to shape and keep only one central leader. The fourth spring, continue to lightly thin to shape the tree. By now, you should have the beginnings of the shape you need for your particular fruit tree. In later years, you will prune more aggressively to maintain the proper shape for your tree.
**Modified central leader:**
The modified leader is initially the same as the central leader method, but eventually you let the central stem branch off to form several tops. Cut back the tops of tall-growing trees from time to time to shorten the trees and let in more light.

**Open(Vase):**
Prune so that the limbs forming the vase effect do not all come out of the main trunk close to each other, or they will form a cluster of weak crotches. Even with the whole center of the tree open, you’ll need to thin the branches and remove the older limbs eventually, just as you would with the central leader method.

The best time to do all of this pruning and thinning is in the late winter or early spring before growth activity begins. The only summer pruning you should do is to remove any sucker growth.

Lastly, a few words about care. After you have gone to all this work to plant and prune your trees, you should fertilize your trees once a year. The easiest way to do this is to use a fertilizer spike in the spring. Also, you must spray your trees to control disease and insect damage. Spraying needs to start just after the flowers have fallen and repeat every 10-14 days until about August 1st. The easiest way to do this is to use a Fruit Tree Spray which contains both a fungicide for disease control and an insecticide.
I hope this information will help you in establishing a home orchard. There is nothing quite like picking really fresh fruit off your own tree. If you have any questions or need further information, let us know.

If you are interested in more information about fruit tree pruning, the following books are pretty good. Ortho books ‘All about Pruning’ (really good), and ‘Pruning Made Easy’ from Story Publishing. I did find a web site that was very informative and straight forward: www.weekendgardener.net. They have different stories every month as well as a library of past articles.