

NORTHWOODS YARD & GARDEN

Weekly Column


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Pruning Apple Trees Pays Dividends

With the arrival of March, yard and garden thoughts start looking ahead to spring. Pruning trees is one of the first items on the spring gardening calendar. Apples top the pruning list. Apple trees pruned on a regular basis produce better fruit and are easier to care for than un-pruned trees.

Apple pruning should be completed before leaves emerge from the trees; anytime from now into April is good. Hand pruning shears, loppers, and a hand saw should all be available as pruning tools. Choosing proper pruning tools assures good clean cuts on all sizes of branches. Always make cuts back to a bud or lateral, and do not treat cuts with any kind of wound dressing.

As is usually the case when pruning, each apple tree is treated as an individual, which makes it difficult to have an exact set of start to finish instructions on pruning apples. Not all orchardists would prune a specific tree the same exact way, but general pruning guidelines assure equal results.



For recently planted apple trees not yet bearing fruit, developing a strong framework is the most important concept of pruning. Choose to keep branches with wide angles from the trunk, as they will hold up fruit loads and horizontally orientated branches develop more flowers. Maintain a space between sets of branches, called scaffolds, to give trees a good solid framework. This framework will be the basis to work off each season in the future.

With an established bearing apple tree, the first step is to remove damaged, diseased, and weak branches. Eliminate crossing and competing branches in the process. Continue to promote horizontal branches over vertical for strength and flowers, leading to increased fruit production. Cut out watersprouts, which are those rapidly growing straight branches filling the center of the tree. Likewise, always remove any suckers coming out of the trunk base.

An important concept of apple pruning is to keep open the center of the tree canopy, so sunlight penetrates, and air flows easily through foliage during the growing season. Fruit quality will improve, and fungal diseases will be reduced. If overall tree height needs to be shortened, cut back to the closest vertically orientated lateral branch, so it can become the new leader. Most apples are trained using the central leader system.

Next week watch here look for more on dormant pruning when I will discuss guidelines on pruning shade trees in the landscape.

Interested in learning more about
Horticulture in Iron County?
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