

Protect Trees From Winter's Wrath With A Few Preventive Steps

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URBANA, Ill. - Most deciduous trees are best pruned while they are in full dormancy. This happens to be February or March for this part of the country.

While many of our landscape trees don't necessarily need yearly pruning, the same can't be said for fruit trees, especially if you want your trees to consistently bear fruit. If fruit trees are left to their own devices, they can quickly get too tall to easily harvest fruit at the tops of trees.

Fruit trees are pruned for several reasons. First, to open the canopy so that all branches receive sunlight. The more sunlight a branch gets, the better its fruit production will be. Second, to help manage diseases and make pesticide applications easier. Opening the canopy to sunlight and air allows the canopy to dry out faster, helping to reduce disease problems. Finally, pruning keeps trees short so that fruit can be reached.

Most people, especially when they first start, are intimidated by pruning fruit trees and end up pruning too little. So, don't be afraid to make large cuts if you feel they are needed. If you're worried, remember what you are trying to achieve when pruning, a tree with a balance between growth and production, is easy to manage and open to light and air.

When pruning, the first step is to clean up the tree by removing any dead, damaged, or diseased branches. If you are removing diseased branches, make sure you are pruning all the way back into healthy wood. For example, with fire-blight-infected trees, make sure you are pruning at least 8 to 10 inches below any discolored bark. Any suckers that have grown should also be removed.

When it comes to managing tree size and shape, there are two types of pruning cuts: Heading and thinning.

Heading cuts are used to shorten and stiffen branches as well as to cause branching. This is done by removing the end of a branch. When doing this, the terminal bud is removed. These terminal buds prevent shoot development from buds below them. By removing these buds, new shoots will begin developing just below the cut's location.

Heading cuts result in a thicker, denser canopy, which can reduce light levels within the tree. Heading cuts should be used primarily for establishing branches in young trees and, after that, used sparingly.

Thinning cuts remove an entire shoot back to its point of origin. Unlike heading cuts, thinning cuts do not induce excessive vigorous regrowth. Thinning cuts open the tree's canopy, allowing more sunlight to reach the interior of the tree.

While pruning trees, make sure to sanitize pruners between trees to prevent the spread of disease. You can use a 10% bleach solution, isopropyl alcohol, or sanitizing wipes.

Also, make sure you are using sharp tools. Sharp tools make cleaner cuts, which will heal faster than cuts made using dull tools. When you are done pruning, make sure to clean up and remove pruned wood, especially if it is diseased, and properly dispose of it.

For more information on tree care, connect with your local Illinois Extension county office at go.illinois.edu/ExtensionOffice.