

Time for Winter Pruning

How To Prune Fruit Trees in Winter – 4 Simple Steps

Wintertime is the ideal time to prune apple and pear trees. We'll talk about stone fruit in another edition.

Although fruit trees can be pruned in the spring and summer as well, wintertime is actually the perfect time. In winter, trees are in a stage of dormancy. During this time, there is little to zero stress when trees are cut back. As well, without their leaves, it is far easier to see what needs to be pruned!

4 Steps to Prune Fruit Trees in Winter

Pruning fruit trees is not as difficult and scary as you may think.

It is, however, an important chore to keep fruit trees healthy and productive.

Trees that are left to grow unchecked are not just unsightly, they will also bear less fruit over the years.

Step 1 – Start with the Right Tools

It is vital to use sharp, clean tools when pruning. Dull blades tear limbs and create stress and damage to a tree. Cleaning the blades is equally important. Blades and teeth on pruners and saws can carry disease from tree to tree. Wipe down or spray a 5/1 solution of water and bleach before and after use and clean the blades from tree to tree.

To tackle most pruning jobs, 3 basic tools will do:

- pruning loppers – to remove most branches that are up to a few centimeters in diameter.
- secateurs - for small shoots and branches
- pruning saw - for removing any larger limbs

When making cuts, always trim back flush to the trunk or branch the limb is attached to. Keeping all cuts flush keeps the tree from having tiny stubs. Not only are they unsightly, they can produce new, unwanted growth.

Step 2 – Eliminate The Dead And Damaged

This is the easiest step of all. Begin by removing any wood that is dead, diseased or damaged.

The last thing you want is a tree spending energy attempting to heal damaged limbs.

When clearing damaged limbs, always cut limbs back flush.

When making cuts, always trim back flush to the trunk or branch the limb is attached to. Keeping all cuts flush keeps the tree from having tiny stubs. Not only are they unsightly, they can produce new, unwanted growth.

Step 3 – Allowing Light in by Thinning

Now it's time to perform a little thinning. This is the one pruning task that causes more angst than any other. Keeping it simple is the key to success. Think of it as opening a blind or window shade for the tree

Trees, like vegetable plants and flowers, need light and air to survive and thrive. This step opens up the tree canopy to let air and light in. Begin by removing branches that cross paths. Remove the smallest or least healthy of the two crossing.

Repeat this process until the branches within the core of the tree are not touching. This will allow the necessary light needed into the tree.

Next, remove branches with horizontal or downward growth. These branches struggle to hold mature fruit. Branches that grow upwards or at an angle upwards are the best. They naturally hold fruit more securely.

Step 4 – Trimming Back Last Year's Growth

The last step is to trim back last year's growth a bit. This helps strengthen the tree.

A good rule of thumb is to take off about a quarter (25%) of last year's growth.

This helps to shape the tree into a nice form, and keeps it manageable.

Your tree pruning is complete! All that is left is to pick up the trimmings from around trees.

Your lawn mower will thank you when it comes time to mow in the spring!

Adapted from <https://thisismygarden.com/2019/01/prune-fruit-trees-winter/>

Other useful links:

How To Prune Young Fruit Trees: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cP1ttKUklwI>

Expert tips for winter pruning and practical tool maintenance: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C7TtuiaBQxI>