A Brief Guide to Pruning Top Fruit

- You don't always need to prune. An unnecessary or misplaced cut is worse than none, so think carefully about where and even whether you need to prune your tree.
- Don't go too far! Over-pruning can damage a tree, leaving it vulnerable to disease, unable to produce much fruit, or may even kill it. ***Try not to prune more than a quarter of the tree's branches in any one year, and a third should be the absolute limit.***
- Training young branches down towards the horizontal can stimulate fruit production. Two ways to do this are through bud selection when making a cut and by festooning the branch by weighing it down with jars or other weights.
- Always use clean and sharp tools. After pruning a diseased tree clean your tools thoroughly before using that tool again. There are cleaning fluid and cloths in the shed.
- Cut branches should be either added to the dead hedge, or put on the woodpile below the compost loo, removing side branches first. Very small bits can be composted, but ***never compost or let lie diseased plant material – please take it home and dispose of via council facilities.*** Consult an experienced orcharder if you're unsure.
- ***If the tree has been ribboned to signify that it needed to be pruned, please remove the ribbon after you have finished.***

Why do we prune?

- To remove branches which are diseased, damaged or dead (the 3 D's)
- To prevent branches crossing or rubbing (a blight risk)
- Maintenance of tree shape
- To increase fruit production
- To stimulate vegetative growth (particularly in a young tree)
- Health and safety (both yours and the trees!)

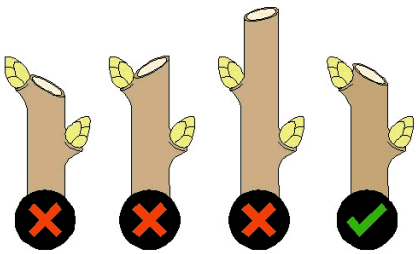
When… In winter (January/February). This stimulates vegetative growth. Stone fruit are done later, after flowering, to avoid fungal diseases.

How… Young trees and mature trees are pruned in different ways:

Formative pruning is used to form the shape of a tree in the first few years of its life. You should aim to cut about half of the previous year's growth, which should be visibly lighter in colour. The method is counterintuitive: pruning harder and deeper on a branch will stimulate growth more than gentler pruning, so to rectify uneven growth of branches the longer/stronger one should be pruned LESS than the smaller, weaker stem. If your sapling has been grafted, remove new shoots that grow below the graft.

Regulatory pruning maintains the shape of a tree once it is established. An open structure facilitates harvest and allows air movement which dispels fungal infections so that the tree can use its energy for fruiting and growing rather than fighting disease.

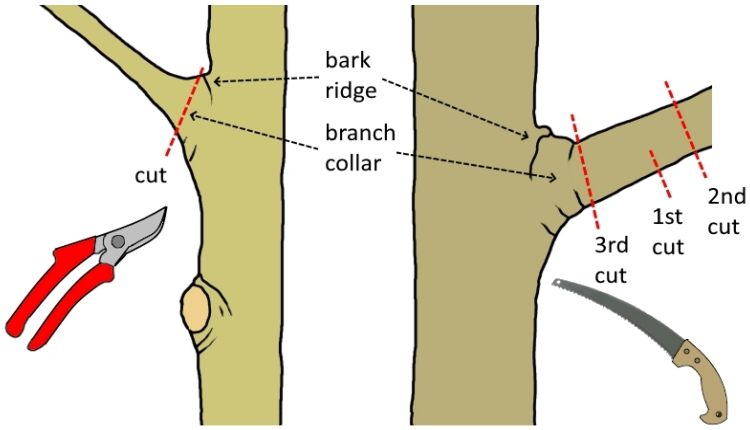
- Use clean sharp secateurs or loppers, and always prune to (i.e. just above) a bud or a side branch. Choose a bud that faces in the direction you want it to grow in.
- Get as close to the bud as you can without jeopardising it when you cut.
- Angle the cut slightly so that any rain will drain away from the bud. Avoid leaving much stem above the bud as this will die back and risk disease.



Here you can see that, on the fourth branch, the cut is as close as possible to the bud without touching it.
On the first branch it is too close.
On the second, it angles the wrong way.
On the third, the cut is too far above the bud, increasing the risk of disease when the cut stem dies back towards the bud.

- In order to maximise the crop, **avoid pruning off *fruiting buds*** if you can (i.e. buds that will bear fruit if pollinated). As a rule, fruiting buds are larger and more rounded with soft downy bud scales, whereas *leafing buds* are slender and more sharply pointed.
- It can be helpful to know if the tree is a *spur-bearer* or *a tip-bearer*. Most apples are spur-bearers and produce fruit along branches of two or more years old. Tip-bearers are less common and produce fruit on the tips of shoots which have grown over the previous year. All our trees are spur-bearers.
- Branches can be entirely removed by cutting them off at their base, just above the wrinkly branch collar. There will be NO regrowth from such cuts, so this is good for opening up the tree structure and increasing airflow. A pruning saw or even a bow saw can be used here. Two preliminary cuts should be made above the final cut to relieve most of the bulk and weight of the branch – the first is a partial cut from underneath to prevent bark stripping and the second removes the bulk of the branch.

Pruning Off Branches Correctly - Don't Cut Into the Branch Collar



Removing thin branch with secateurs or loppers

Removing thick branch with pruning saw

Regrowth

- The height dilemma. Vertical branches waste energy and nutrients if they are high up with hard-to-pick or no fruit. Pruning these high stems can redirect the tree's resources down toward more productive lower areas. BUT over-pruning of vertical branches can stimulate their growth to even greater heights next year! Remember that the tree has a finite amount of nutrients available to it through the year, and growth in the size or height of the tree could be at the expense of harvest. It may best to remove branches that start high up at their base to avoid stimulating unreachable regrowth.
- Water shoots (i.e. new shoots that grow rapidly upwards from a previous pruning point) and suckers (i.e. growth from beneath the graft) are best removed as soon as seen. When tiny, they can be gently pulled off by hand.
- Taking off a large limb on the sunny side will encourage more shoots to emerge around it but if these shoots are rubbed out as soon as they appear, with time the reshooting tendency will fade.

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