

Time to Start Fruit Tree Management

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Before you know it, spring will have sprung and our fruit trees will be in bloom. There are some critical jobs that need to be done before that happens, though.

Training and pruning fruit trees are essential for growing fruit successfully. Fruit size, quality and pest management are influenced by training and pruning. Untrained and unpruned trees become entangled masses of shoots and branches that produce little or no fruit and harbor insects and diseases. Additionally, unpruned trees tend to break apart under heavy fruit loads.

Different fruit species need to be pruned differently because of the way they grow. If the tree hasn't been properly pruned in many years, there will be additional techniques needed to bring the tree back into useful production. Proper fruit pruning is too complex a topic to cover adequately in this column, but you can contact me at the Extension office to get some literature on the subject.

Sanitation is extremely important, because it removes the overwintering forms of many disease and insect problems from the orchard. In early spring, remove fruit on the ground and any mummified fruit left on plants after harvest. Also, rake up any leaves still under the trees. These potential disease-carriers can either be thrown in the trash, or buried deeply in the garden (away from the trees).

If fire blight was a problem on your apples and pears last year, remove those dead branches now. Blighted twigs at this time of year should be black and shriveled. Cut about 6 to 8 inches below the visibly blighted area and destroy. On brambles, the fungus that causes anthracnose survives on both living and dead plant tissue. Remove last year's fruiting canes, as well as anything diseased.

Certain chemicals can be sprayed now, before growth begins, to control pests. Pay very close attention to the stage of development of your tree, since some of these products may damage exposed tissue, or the pest itself won't be active yet.

Peach leaf curl has been a serious problem for the last several years. A single treatment of either liquid lime-sulfur or chlorothalonil (Daconil), sprayed on peaches before the buds swell, should offer excellent control. Lime-sulfur (this is the name of the chemical, it's NOT a mixture of lime and sulfur!) can also be used to control the fungus

disease anthracnose: apply it as the buds begin to swell on grapes, and on brambles just as the bud tips are beginning to show some green.

If spider mites, aphids, or scale were problems on your apple tree last year, an application of superior oil (dormant oil) can be applied between now and when the buds begin to show green. After at least one-half inch of green has emerged from the buds, the oil will cause substantial burning, so switch to a multi-purpose fruit spray. Stop using this product once the plants begin to bloom, to protect the bees.

For more information on early-season fruit care, contact the Purdue Extension Service at 812-435-5287.