

May 15, 2020  
Tired Apple Trees

“I’m tired,” my old apple tree said to me. It didn’t, in reality actually speak, instead it had invoked its nonverbal communication skills by not blooming this year. This is nothing new for this tree, in fact it has done this many times in the past.

This hollow old tree has had at least a 70-year life and last year it bore a heavy fruit crop. So heavy that it was unable to support the load and a large limb split away. This year it decided to take some time off.

This alternate year bearing is not usual for apple trees and we refer to it as biannual bearing. Last years’ production of such large numbers of apples had taken the energy from the tree during the time it should have been making the flower buds for this spring. There is only so much a tree can do with the sunlight hitting its leaves so all its efforts went to the overloaded crop of apples.

Last year I saw that excessive load of apples early on and unfortunately, I suffer from the could ‘a, would ‘a, should ‘a syndrome. I knew I needed to thin that load of fruit but never got it done. Not only did it cost me a huge branch but if I would have taken some of that fruit away it may have been left with some energy to produce 2020 fruit buds.

Hand thinning of apples should be done within six weeks of full bloom leaving the largest apple in a cluster. After thinning, apples should be spaced about 8 to 10 inches apart on the branches. Pears, apricots, and peaches may also need to be thinned. Fruit should be spaced 6 to 8 inches apart on the branches.

A common complaint from the home fruit grower is, “I had lots of apples but they were small.” A tree only has so much energy and thinning allows that energy to be put into making larger apples.

Certain apple varieties are more prone to biannual bearing including Golden Delicious, Fuji and Honeycrisp. Other plants that also exhibit this phenomenon are pistachio, avocado, olive and many more.

Along with these tendencies to do biannual bearing there comes the disruptive force of a spring freeze. This will cause the death of the fruit buds and delays the tree another year. This is why some people refer to biannual bearing as alternate bearing by not committing to claim it is every other year but ever once-in-a-while.

Once-in-a-while, sounds like something an old tired apple tree or for that matter, a person would say. It goes really well with the could ‘a, would ‘a should ‘a syndrome.

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