



Basic Deciduous Fruit Tree Pruning for the Small Landholder

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For the home orchard, pruning to the vase system is probably the simplest method. If your trees have been cut back in the nursery, a basic framework may have already been established. The aim is to select future leaders (main structural limbs) from uniformly spaced shoots of similar diameter (see Figure 1A). The selected leaders should be pruned to about the same height from the ground to outside buds. Avoid selecting branches for leaders with narrow crotch angles (less than 30 degrees), as they are likely to split under crop load later. If the nursery tree has not been cut back, it will need to be cut off at about 60 cm above ground level and allowed to shoot and grow on for a year before selecting the leaders.

Figure 1A.

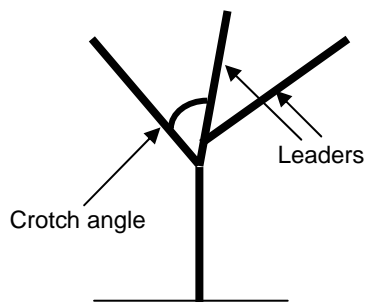
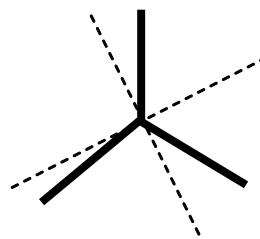


Figure 1B. Top View



Select 3 or 4 evenly spaced shoots of similar strength for future leaders.

Ten basic pruning guidelines

1. Leave the weakest leader the longest – this will encourage it to strengthen. This also means the strongest leader should be pruned the shortest, to weaken it.
2. Always prune the leaders to an outside bud.
3. Strong growth should be removed if it is heading into the centre of the tree or growing towards another leader. The only strong growth to be encouraged should be heading away from the centre of the tree and in the lower half of the tree.
4. All fruiting arms/side shoots should not grow to be more than one-third the diameter of the limb they are attached to, at the junction. Growth greater than this 'one-third' rule should be removed before it takes over from the main limb.
5. All fruiting arms/side shoots should decrease in diameter (strength); the higher in the tree they are located.
6. Vigorous upright growth (water shoots) growing in the centre of the tree should be removed. These shoots are best removed in the summer before their diameter is such that it requires a large pruning cut.
7. Prune upright shoots to horizontal side laterals if you wish to weaken their growth.
8. Prune off narrow (weak) crotch angled growth.
9. Remove dead or diseased wood and burn.
10. Remove crowded and crossed over branches and laterals.

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Figures 2A and 2B below show a mature tree before and after pruning following the above ten points:

Figure 2A.



Figure 2B.



Do not use paint to seal large pruning cuts (there is the possibility that diseases will be sealed in, rather than sealed out). It is far better to prune on warm sunny days and allow the plants natural drying and sealing processes to occur.

Most deciduous fruit trees are pruned in the winter. Some summer pruning is done to allow sunlight into the tree to colour the fruit.

Further information on pruning is available in fruit growing texts or online at the Department of Agriculture and Food's website www.agric.wa.gov.au

Specific pruning points

Pruning is generally regarded as a winter chore. Almonds, apricots and cherries are the most susceptible of fruit trees to disease invasion and it is better that they be pruned in summertime, after harvest, under good drying conditions.

Plums and cherries – Bear their fruit on spurs (short shoots). Prune the new season's growth in half to encourage replacement spurs. Thin out old spurs and reduce crowding.

Peaches and nectarines – Produce fruit on new seasons wood and need annual pruning to keep the fruiting wood close to the leaders and fruiting arms. Remove half of the new season's growth and any weak laterals to reduce overcrowding.

Apples – Produce fruit on spurs and laterals, mainly on wood of two years and older. Once the tree has been established, pruning should be limited to removing weak laterals and reducing overcrowding.

Almonds and apricots – Prune to reduce vigorous shoots (by half) limit overcrowding and remove weak laterals.

Finally, do not be overly concerned about pruning. Follow the above points and you will improve the trees shape and production. What may not look right after this years pruning, can be remedied next year.