



UNIVERSITY *of* CALIFORNIA

# Agriculture & Natural Resources

COOPERATIVE EXTENSION • YOLO COUNTY

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## Pruning fruit trees

Young trees are pruned to train them to become structurally sound, to make them easy to care for and to ensure the production of high quality fruit.

Pruning will:

- \* Control size for easier care in maintaining and picking fruit
- \* Increase strength by developing strong limb structure
- \* Distribute sunlight evenly throughout the tree
- \* Regulate fruit bearing by removing excess fruitwood
- \* Renew fruitwood to continue having strong buds and flowers
- \* Remove undesirable wood such as dead, broken, and crossing branches.

The optimum time of the year to prune fruit trees is the dormant season: December, January (best) and until the middle of February.

There are two types of pruning cuts: thinning and heading.

**Thinning** is the removal of the entire shoot or limb where it originates.

Scissors-type hand pruners allow closer cuts. Close cuts heal faster. Stubs will be more susceptible to infection.

**Heading** is the removal of part of a branch.

In a heading cut select the right bud. Normally the bud points in the direction of the new branch. A bottom bud of a horizontal branch will likely continue horizontally. Often eliminating only one or two misplaced, large primary limbs in the center opens up the tree giving it an entirely new look.

While you are pruning, be aware that the strongest growth goes to the terminal bud. When the terminal bud is cut, the lateral bud becomes the terminal bud and growth continues in that direction.



## **Training/Pruning Systems**

**Open Center or Vase-Shaped** can be used on all fruit and nut trees. Best for European plums, Asian pears and almonds. Makes big trees, but shading from heavy top growth can be a problem.

In the first year select three to four limbs distributed evenly around trunk. Leave small branches on these limbs for early fruiting and sunburn protection. Head limbs half their length, which should be 24-30".

In the second year select one or two limbs on each primary. Head these back to 1/2 their length (24-30"). Remove other limbs.

**Central Leader** makes a small tree, about half the size of a vase type. Excellent for distributing sunlight.

After first year select three to five lateral branches, lowest about 12-15" above ground, spaced evenly around the tree, two to three feet apart vertically. Head leader and remove laterals that may compete with leader.

In the following years develop another series of laterals every two to three feet higher up the central leader. It will likely be necessary to spread laterals physically when five to six feet long in order to form a proper angle (about 45°) with the trunk.

**"Y" System** starts at knee height as other systems. Makes a small tree. Easy to train. Good for peaches and nectarines. Space trees six to seven feet apart in rows 15 feet apart. The "Y" is perpendicular to the row. For apples plums, pears and cherries, increase distance between trees to eight to ten feet. Develop lateral branches from all side of each arm of the "Y".

## **Pruning Abandoned or Neglected Fruit Trees**

Whether today's trees are remnants from yesterday's orchards, or simply abandoned for other reasons, pruning may look like an impossible task. In some cases, these trees can be rejuvenated and made functional in the home orchard or landscape. In others, planting a new tree may be more practical.

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