

Pruning Fruit Trees

1. Goals and Timing

There are normally two goals when pruning an apple tree:

1. Initially on young trees to encourage a strong, solid framework
2. On mature trees to maintain shape and encourage fruit production

The best time to prune apple trees is in late winter or very early spring **before any new growth starts**.

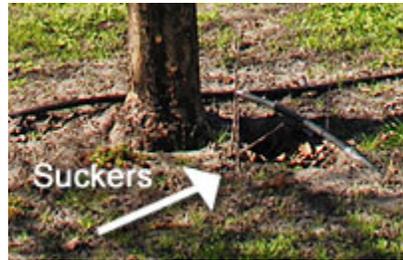
The only growth you ever want to prune or remove during the summer months, when the tree is actively growing, is a sucker.

On young and old trees, remove all suckers that grow up from the rootstock. The best time to do this is during the summer when suckers are least likely to resprout. You can either prune them off, or you can use Sucker Stopper which is a chemical to discourage any suckers from re-growing

Sucker Stopper prevents suckers from coming back after you have pruned them back. All you do, is after you have cut the suckers back, is cover where the sprouts have been removed with Sucker Stopper.

Try to treat the sucker area before the suckers get 10 inches long. The earlier you treat them, the better. Make sure you read the label carefully, and don't apply during bloom or fruit set because fruit set reduction may occur. Control usually lasts about 3 months.

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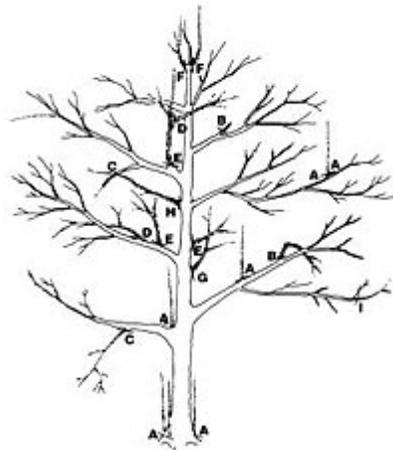


2. Suggested Pruning

When pruning just about anything, including apple trees, here is a list of situations you always want to prune out.

- A. Suckers
- B. Stubs or broken branches
- C. Downward-growing branches
- D. Rubbing or criss-crossing branches
- E. Upward growing interior branches
- F. Competing leaders
- G. Narrow crotches
- H Whorls

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3. Pruning Young Trees

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For mature or neglected apple trees, skip to number 4

The day apple trees are planted is the day to begin to train and prune them for future fruit production. Too often people plant apple trees and leave them untended for several years. This neglect results in poor growth, delayed and under-sized fruiting.

The following pruning styles are if you have recently purchased, or own a young tree, and need to determine its shape as a mature tree. One pruning style isn't better than another.

A new apple tree will usually be either a 3 to 4 foot (.91-1.2 m) whip (it has no branches), or a 4 to 6 foot (1.2-1.8 m) tall young tree with several branches. This is assuming you have not purchased a dwarf variety.

Central Leader

Training to a central leader produces a tree that has a pyramid shape.

If your newly planted tree is a whip (it has no branches and looks like a long stick) cut the trunk at a height of about 32 inches (81 cm). This will stimulate branches to grow along the trunk, and the topmost bud will become the central leader.

For a new tree that already has side branches, cut back the trunk to 32 inches (81 cm). Cut off any branches along the trunk between the ground and 24 inches (61 cm) high. Cut back any remaining side branches to 2 to 4 inches (5-10 cm), leaving no more than 2 buds on each branch stub.

First Summer: Make sure the top shoot becomes the leader. Pinch back all other shoots.

First Winter: If there has been a lot of new growth, choose 3 to 5 branches for the first set of scaffold branches. These branches should spiral around the trunk with about 4 inches (10 cm) vertical distance between each branch. Cut off the other side branches and any vertical branches that may compete with the leader. Prune back the main leader shoot, but keep it as the highest part of the tree to maintain your pyramid shape.

Second Summer: Make sure that the top shoot is growing vertically, cut off any competing shoots.

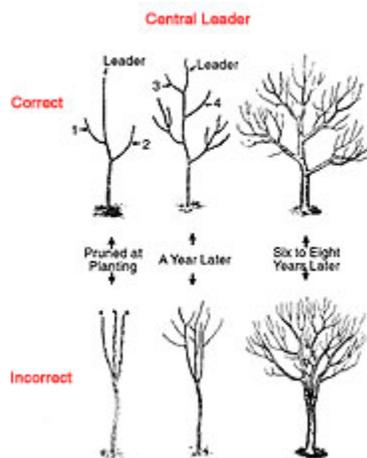
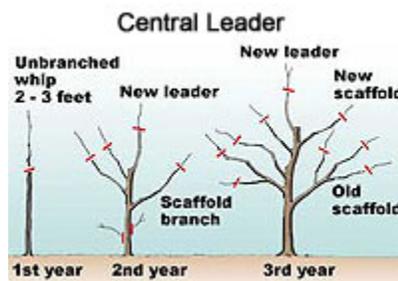
Second Winter: Select another set of scaffold branches 2 to 3 feet (.61-.91 m) higher than the first set. If the tree didn't grow enough the second year, do this the third winter.

Thereafter: Keep doing the above until you have 3 or 4 sets of scaffold branches. Then simply keep that shape by pruning out watersprouts and any crossing, diseased, or unwanted branches. Try to keep the lower branches longer than the upper ones to maintain the shape.

Open Center

Apples trained with an open center form a vase-shaped tree with no central leader; instead, several major branches angle outward and upward from the top of the trunk.

Cut back the newly planted tree to 24 to 32 inches (61-81 cm), depending on how low you want the major branches to



form. Choose strong, well-spaced branches that are 6 to 10 inches (15-25 cm) below the cut to become primary scaffold branches.

If the young tree has some side branches, cut back the leader to 24 to 32 inches (61-81 cm). Select well-placed side branches that point out from the trunk in different directions 6 to 10 inches (15-25 cm) below the cut to become scaffold branches.

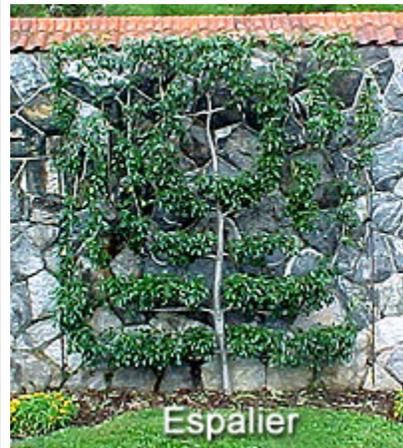
Cut back the selected branches to 2 to 4 inch (5-10 cm) stubs, and cut off all the other side branches. By the end of the first growing season, the major scaffold branches should be formed.

Espalier or Cordon (meaning rope)

You can grow apples as espaliers as ornamentals against walls or fences, along wires, or on lattices. Semi-dwarf varieties are the best choices because they grow slower and require less pruning than full-size varieties.

Simply train the branches into the shape you want, or along a fence or wall. Every year, prune to shape.

Direct its growth by pruning frequently during the growing season and during the dormant season to guide it into the shape you want. It may take several years of training before the tree conforms to the shape you want it to take.



4. Pruning Mature or Neglected Trees

Full-size trees

Mature trees usually already have their shape determined, so it really comes down to maintaining their shape and size. Every year:

- Remove broken or diseased branches
- Crossing limbs
- Weak stems
- Any branches growing inward to the tree's center
- Any growing vertically or straight down
- Thin out enough new growth to allow light to filter into the canopy when the tree has leafed out so the fruit can ripen and color properly
- Shorten any branches that are too long to avoid leggy growth
- Shape tree evenly and remember apples flower and fruit on old wood, so head back new growth to direct energy back into the flowers and fruit

Also, if in the past years too many apples have formed and

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crowded each other out, you can thin the spurs to only a few per branch. This will allow enough light and air to circulate around to avoid diseases and small, puny fruit.

Neglected trees

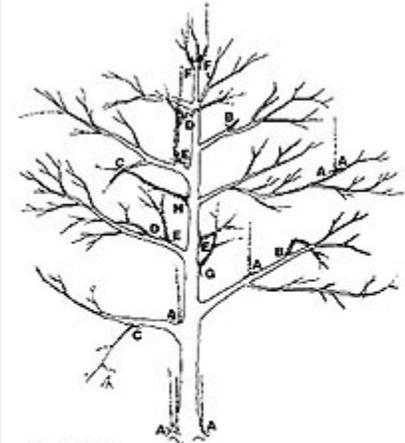
Many people will purchase a house where an apple tree was planted on the property several years ago. Often, the previous owners did not take the time to properly prune the tree. The tree has become bushy and weak and will produce very poor quality apples. Such a tree requires extensive corrective pruning.

The main objective in pruning such a tree is to try to open up the interior to allow good light penetration.

The first step is to remove all the upright, vigorous growing shoots at their base that are shading the interior. As with the young apple trees, it is necessary to select 3 to 5 lower scaffold branches with good crotch angles and spaced around the tree. Limbs with poor angles, and excess scaffold limbs, should be removed at their base. In some cases it is advisable to spread the corrective pruning over two to three seasons. When severe pruning is done in the winter, the trees should not be fertilized that spring.

Dwarf trees

Prune dwarf varieties every year the same way you would prune a full-size tree. Maintain its height by cutting back the central leader by 2 to 3 feet (.61-.91 m), depending on the vigor of the tree, to a strong lateral. In future years, you may have to repeat this to keep the tree the height you want.



- A - Suckers
- B - Stubs or broken branches
- C - Downward growing branches
- D - Rubbing branches
- E - Upward growing interior branches
- F - Competing leaders
- G - Narrow crotches
- H - Whorls

5. Conclusion

Pruning apple trees is very easy and fast, and you are rewarded with a beautiful tree filled with apple blossoms in the spring, and tangy, sweet fruit in the fall.

Just as a side note, if you have problems with Codling Moth, please read our article on how to get rid of this pest. We offer a home remedy as well as other methods. [Codling Moth](#)

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Hilary Rinaldi is a professional landscaper who has written for gardening publications such as "Seed Trade News" and "Houseplant Magazine". She also has been a professional public speaker and educator in the gardening industry for over 20 years sharing [gardening information and tips](#) to as many people as she can.

<http://www.weekendgardener.net/how-to/prune-apple-trees.htm>

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