

# Fruit Tree Training.

Controlling the size and yield of your fruit trees, and keeping them safe and healthy, starts with the training. There are three basic techniques for training trees.

Vase pruning, or open vase training.

- The tree is headed back, 3 to 4 branches are retained that are close together on the trunk. They are selected to create an open growth habit with spreading limbs.
- Easy to get at the fruit, easy to spray, structurally somewhat unsound. Weight of the fruit in a heavy-crop year can cause limb breakage.

Central leader pruning.

- The tree is allowed to grow with a central leader; branches are selected for placement up the trunk 6 to 12 inches apart. The tree develops a pyramidal growth habit, akin to what we do with shade trees.
- Sturdy and safer, but much of the fruit may be out of reach and it's hard to spray.

Modified central leader.

- The tree grows with a central leader, and then at some point in the future you "drop" it down to an existing lateral branch. Placement of the main branches is as with central leader pruning: six to 12 inches apart up the trunk.
- Structurally safer than vase training, but still enables you to keep the fruit accessible.

This is a decision made at the time of planting (vase) or within the first couple of years. Bringing a larger tree down for better access has to be done carefully, and can ultimately harm or shorten the life of the tree. A larger tree needs to be assessed on an individual basis, and probably involves a tree service and a 2 to 3 year plan for a combination of heading cuts followed by selective thinning.

Goals of training and pruning for homeowners:

- Reduce the size of the tree. You can easily keep your trees under 10 feet tall.
- Reduce the yield for better size and quality.
- Keep the trees safe and healthy; reduce limb breakage.

It is important to observe and understand where (on what type of wood) the fruit is produced. Some trees need to be pruned every year because they fruit on *new wood*: peaches and nectarines. Others can be pruned more lightly and less often because they fruit on *old wood* and *spurs*. Spurs increase over time, so these trees may need to be pruned more as fruit production increases. Plums and pluots are good examples.

Once the basic structure of the tree is established, you can do much of your maintenance pruning in the late summer. Summer pruning, done after the tree has finished the main growth for the season (basically, usually shortly after you harvest) is an easy way to manage the size of the tree. You just prune out the upright shoots that are taller than you want. You can also remove suckers and watersprouts then, those strong whippy shoots that are reaching for the sky. This type of pruning doesn't require any special training or expertise.

Note: Apricots and cherries are now recommended for summer or fall pruning *only*, due to a disease that infects pruning wounds in the rainy season.