

Early Spring Care for Fruit Trees

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When the apple and cherry trees start to bloom, we know spring has finally arrived. Fruit trees are wonderful additions to the home landscape, both as fruit producers and ornamental blooming trees.

To maximize the health of your fruit trees, begin with proper pruning, then provide good care through fertilization, watering and mulching throughout the summer. Next, develop an integrated pest management plan tailored to the specific insect and disease problems affecting your trees.

Do Some Research

The “Midwest Home Fruit Production Guide” from Ohio State University Extension, <http://bit.ly/FruitGuide>, is an excellent resource to learn about the best production techniques, including fertilization, watering and mulching for each specific fruit. Diseases and insects are discussed individually for each type of fruit, making it easy for the home orchardist to determine the problems affecting their trees.

Pruning

Late February through March is the best time of year to prune the home orchard, just before trees begin to break



Neglected fruit trees, like this apple, require extensive pruning to reestablish good tree structure and improve productivity.

bud. This minimizes the potential for cold injury and trees heal wounds fastest when pruned at this time of year. First prune trees with higher levels of winter hardiness, including apple, pear, tart cherry and plum. Save sweet cherry, peach and apricot for last.

The main purpose of fruit tree pruning is to increase sunlight penetration of the tree’s canopy, remove dead, diseased or less productive wood and shape the crown into a strong, efficient structure.

Pruning increases fruit size, promotes uniform ripening, increases fruit sugar content and decreases pest problems due to better spray coverage and faster drying of the foliage after rain. Neglected trees and vigorous cultivars require heavy pruning to reestablish good tree structure and optimize production. Do not use pruning paints or wound dressings.

Refer to the “Midwest Home Fruit Production Guide” for specifics on the best pruning practices for each type of tree.



This peach tree shows the open pruning structure often used with fruit trees to allow light in and maximize productivity.

What Troubles Your Fruit Trees?

Fruit growers often call Nebraska Extension asking what pesticide products should be used on their home fruit plantings and when they should



Fruits, both very young and nearly mature, can be infected by disease pathogens (pictured at left are typical fungal bodies on an apple). Infected fruit can dry up into “mummies” (pictured at right) which can reinfect the tree next year. Good sanitation through removal and clean-up of mummies reduces disease pressure.

be applied. Our first question for them is, “What insects and diseases are you trying to control?”

In the past, orchard pest control was often done with a pre-determined schedule of pesticide applications at specific times of year. Now — with growing concern related to pesticide impact on 1) environment, 2) pollinators and 3) human health — it makes sense to develop a customized spray schedule based on the specific insect and disease problems present in your fruit plantings.

In other words, growers only need to use pesticides to control insect or disease problems on their trees which can’t be controlled with good management techniques. The “Midwest Home Fruit Production Guide” outlines common pest problems for each type of fruit. Determine which problems affected your trees and target your control efforts only to those problems.

For example, if apple tree cultivars with good resistance to cedar-apple rust and apple scab are used in the home orchard, then fungicide applications for disease control may not be necessary. Or fewer fungicide applications may provide adequate control. In this

orchard, insects may be the most important pest problem.

Integrated Pest Management

This strategy of pest control uses a combination of methods to manage pests, reducing the total amount of chemical pesticides required. Integrated Pest Management (IPM) protects the health of humans, pets, non-target insects and the environment. A good IPM program includes the following steps.

- Monitoring plants regularly for pest problems, enabling the home orchardist to control problems in early stages.
- Accurate identification of pest problems so effective control strategies are used.
- Establish damage threshold levels — the amount of damage resulting in unacceptable fruits. Lower levels of pest damage are determined acceptable and full-out chemical warfare doesn’t begin because of a few egg-laying scars on your apples.
- Use a variety of control methods, including cultural, mechanical and biological, then chemical. Start with the least-toxic methods providing good control.

Of course, identifying the exact insect and disease problems affecting your fruits is always the first step and Nebraska Extension in Lancaster County is a great resource to help, along with your local nursery and garden center professionals. For assistance with fruit pest identification, call Extension at 402-441-7180 or bring samples to 444 Cherrycreek Road, Suite A,

Lincoln. Office hours are Monday–Friday, 8:30 a.m.–4:30 p.m.

Early Season Pest Control

Common early season IPM pest control tactics used by many fruit growers, which can be completed in March, include dormant oil or fungicide applications and orchard sanitation.

Sanitation — Fruit tree disease problems often overwinter on dried fruits or “mummies” that fell on the ground last fall and have remained there under the tree during the winter. This also happens with leaves from trees infected with fungal diseases; the spores overwinter on the leaves and are present to re-infect the tree the following spring as it begins to leaf out.

For this reason, sanitation beneath and around your fruit trees is very important. Collect and discard or burn all debris from the tree, including leaves and fruit each year.

Dormant Fungicide Applications — Application of copper fungicide is an effective way to control peach leaf curl and plum pockets when applied to dormant fruit trees during late winter. Bordeaux mixture, a combination of copper sulfate and lime, or fixed copper fungicides, such as tribasic copper sulfate, copper oxychloride sulfate and cupric hydroxide, can be used. Bordeaux mixture has the advantage of adhering to plants better during rainy weather, but it does stain surfaces

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