February 2022
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Alamance Gardener

Alamance County Cooperative Extension Horticulture Department

Coming Events

Workshops and Demonstrations

THINK GREEN THURSDAYS*
*And some SATURDAYS

Thu., Feb. 10, 10 a.m., DEMO at BSF*
Fruit Tree Pruning
Sat., Feb. 19, 10 a.m., DEMO at BSF*
Fruit Tree Pruning
Thu., Feb. 24, 10 a.m., DEMO at BSF*
Grapevine Pruning
Thu., Mar. 3, 10 a.m., DEMO
Pruning Shrubs and Trees
Thu., Mar. 10, 10 a.m. to 2 p.m., at BSF*
Blueberry School
Thu., Mar. 17, 10 a.m.
Camellias—Winter's Roses
Sat., Mar. 19, 10 a.m., DEMO at BSF*
Pruning Small Fruit Plants

*BSF pruning demos will be at Buster Sykes Demonstration Farm, 2430 Turner Road, Mebane, NC.
Pruning Shrubs and Trees and Camellias classes will be held at the Agricultural Building, 209 N. Graham-Hopedale.

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Why Prune?

Why, when and how are probably the most common questions we get when it comes to pruning and training fruit trees. Let's start with apples.

An apple orchard is a solar collector – fruit trees convert sunlight energy to chemical energy then use this energy to grow nutritious apples. A primary goal of pruning and training is to improve sunlight distribution. Controlling tree size and increasing yield efficiency are two other important pruning goals.

Pruning is a dwarfing process and can be used to maintain a tree in the tree's allotted space in the row or in the yard. By pruning an apple tree, we also do a partial crop thinning by removing some fruit bearing surfaces. This decreases the crop load—important because apple trees will set more fruit than they can support. Fruit size and quality decline on old fruiting spurs, so removing some through pruning stimulates new wood with young spurs.

Diseases are often a problem on apple trees, so we prune to improve air movement which promotes better drying conditions and spray penetration. To further reduce insect and disease issues on the tree it is best to remove any damaged and diseased branches.

The final reason for pruning is to shape the canopy to the desired tree form. Apple trees are trained to a conical or pyramidal shape in most systems. Limbs that are half the diameter of the trunk at the point of attachment should be removed. These branches tend to shade the lower portions of the canopy.

Let's Cut to the Core

When do we train and prune apple trees?

There's a difference between training and pruning. *Training*, which involves tree development and form, takes place in the first 4-5 years of the tree's life. Young apple trees are usually trained when they are first planted. *Pruning* involves tree function and size and is conducted for the entire life of the tree. During the tree's early productive years, excessive vigor can be contained by pruning. As the tree gets older and starts to decline, pruning helps to promote vigor and allow maximum sunlight to penetrate the tree canopy. When we prune older apple trees, we prune them in the dormant season, usually in January through the beginning of March. The younger trees we will prune later in February through the beginning of March. Summer pruning usually is limited to removing the upright and vigorous current season's growth by using a thinning cut.

How do we prune apple trees? Two main types of pruning cuts are done on apple trees: heading and thinning cuts. The heading cut removes the terminal portion of the branch, limb, or shoot. Heading cuts are used to shorten and stiffen branches and induce branching. Heading cuts should be reserved for training young trees and for limb renewal on mature trees.

Thinning cuts are when an entire branch limb or shoot is removed. Growth is stimulated at the site of the cut, but to a much lesser extent than the heading cut. The main response is fewer shoots, which results in a more open canopy and improved light distribution. Thinning cuts are used on young and mature trees to maximize light penetration, crop production, and fruit quality. Thinning cuts are also used in older trees as a method of fruiting shoot renewal. When a previous season limb is removed, buds in the bark in the collar of the shoot will develop into a desirable fruiting shoot for the next year.

In the pruning of older apple trees, we prune more vigorously, thinning out many limbs to open them up for sunlight penetration. In pruning the younger trees (up to 10 years of age) we are pruning lightly and doing more training. The central leader training system is the main system that most growers use, but many new training systems are being used by growers because of the more dwarfing rootstocks. For more information on these training systems and on training and pruning apple trees visit this website: https://www.growables.org/information/documents/trainingpruning.pdf or, better still...

...bring your questions to one of our upcoming pruning demonstrations at Buster Sykes Farm Orchard. See page one of this newsletter for dates and registration information. We will demonstrate the various pruning cuts on apple trees, as well as pruning methods on peaches, pears, blackberries, blueberries, grapes and figs.

NC STATE UNIVERSITY
The Buster Sykes Agricultural Demonstration Farm and Forest
Managed by the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences, NC State University

NC STATE Extension Master Gardener

February Garden Tips

Put in an asparagus patch now. Prepare the bed well, because asparagus is a perennial vegetable that will produce for many years, given a good home. Select a male hybrid, such as Jersey Giant or Jersey Gem. This way, no energy will be wasted on seed production. Plant 1- or 2-year-old crowns, but wait until next year to begin a limited harvest.

Plant potatoes, broccoli and onion sets and seeds of carrots, cabbage, onions, peas, radishes, rutabagas, spinach and turnips.

You may fertilize trees and shrubs this month, if needed. In general, if trees and shrubs are growing at a rate that is acceptable to you and the foliage looks healthy, there is no need to fertilize. Excessive fertilizer can cause rank growth and create need for more pruning, which in itself is invigorating to the plant.

Grapes and large fruit trees should be pruned this month to enhance fruit production, remove unwanted growth and improve framework. Attend one of our free pruning demonstrations this month to learn the best way to improve your fruit yields. See page 1 for days and times.

Spray wild onion and wild garlic in lawns with a broadleaf herbicide. Be sure to read the label on the product you use and follow the directions carefully. Keep in mind that most of these products work best when air temperature is between 50 and 80 degrees as that is when the weeds are actively growing and will take up the material. You will want to add a spreader-sticker to the spray mix to help the herbicide adhere to those skinny, slippery leaves.

You can divide perennials now as the tips emerge. Daylilies, Siberian iris, hostas, and shasta daisies are a few to divide and replant now. Daylilies, especially, will benefit from division every few years. Spread them around your garden or pass the divisions along to friends.

Trim back ornamental grasses this month. Muhlenbergia, Miscanthus, Pennisetum and other grasses will have a fresher look come spring if old foliage is cut back now. The trick is to cut only the old foliage and avoid nipping the new growth tips. So, check before cutting. If new growth has begun, adjust cutting height accordingly. Although not a grass, Liriope (also known as "Monkey Grass") should be cut back now, too. This is easily done with your lawn mower. Set the blade high and go!

Sedges and other grass-like ground covers such as dwarf Mondo should be cut back only if the old foliage is looking ragged. These plants are a bit slower to recover.

Draw up a layout for your vegetable garden. Try to rotate vegetable crops so that the same families of plants are not growing in the same spot year after year. A five-year rotation is ideal to reduce plant-specific pest and disease populations, but if that's not practical for you, a rotation of as little as three years would still be helpful. Remember that cabbage, broccoli, turnips, collards, Brussels sprouts, kale, kohlrabi and cauliflower are all in the same family! Another popular vegetable family includes potatoes, tomatoes, eggplants and peppers.

Arbor Gate Plants of the Month

The Shape of Winter

Planning your garden should include thoughts about what you'd like to see throughout the seasons. This patch holds a surprise view on a winter's walk through Arbor Gate. Flower heads left for wildlife on narrowleaf ironweed—*Vernonia lettermannii*—mirror the dome of budding *Edgeworthia chrysantha.* Billowy *Muhlenbergia capillaris* 'White Cloud' is a perfect foil for *Corylus avellana* 'Contorta' - Harry Lauder's walking stick.

Visit Arbor Gate or any public garden in winter to discover beauty before and after bloom and find inspiration for your own garden.

Read more about the plants in the picture here:

https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/vernonia-lettermanii/

https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/edgeworthia-chrysantha/

https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/muhlenbergia-capillaris/

https://plants.ces.ncsu.edu/plants/corylus-avellana/