



Pest Corner

February, 2008

It is Late Winter...and while still cold, it is a proper time to start caring for deciduous trees/shrubs in our gardens. What might you do with existing old fruit trees, or if someone asks your advice on what to do with old apple trees that refuse to die, but do not produce much fruit. What about old Lilacs? February is the time to make decisions about pruning, cutting, and renovation.

Old fruit trees:

Should you attempt to restore them, or replace them with new plants? To decide, examine the tree condition first: Is the trunk of the tree sound with no major holes, or a rotted center? Does the tree appear to be healthy with minimal limb dieback or signs of disease?

Does the tree produce a desirable variety of fruit that you can eat? Will you be able to care for the tree properly? Think about its size and location. If the tree is large, will you need a ladder to do spraying, picking, and pruning?

Caution: Abandoned trees harbor insects and diseases that can damage other fruit trees.

If the old fruit tree is worth saving, restoring instead of replacing will provide some fruit during the renovation process. Be aware that if you decide to save your old fruit tree, you must start a program of renovation pruning that may take three or four crop years.

Basics of Renovation Pruning of Fruit Trees:

Different pruning techniques are required depending on fruit and/or variety. Apple, pear and cherry tree reshaping requires several years. Consider keeping a pruning journal, with notes about what you do and results you observe. Perhaps taking a digital photo of the tree before and after, through the seasons, may help in tracking its progress.

Year 1: Reduce the height of the tree. If it is over twenty feet tall, it is all right to shorten it to six to eight feet with the first pruning. Shorten the tree by cutting the main scaffold limbs back to a strong, well-positioned side shoot or riser. Thin out the upper third of the tree by removing dead branches, crossing limbs and hanging branches. This will allow better light and air movement into the tree in the coming year

Year 2 (summer): Inspect growth and remove most large vigorous new shoots that grew at the top of the tree. If you see new shoots developing lower down in the tree, especially off the main trunk or scaffolds, leave them alone. Several of those may become new fruit-bearing wood in the lower canopy. During the second dormant period you should decide on the desired final height for the tree. You probably will not be able to lower the tree more than another two feet from the previous year without hurting its yield potential. Continue to thin out shoots in the upper half of the tree trying to space the main limbs and distribute the new fruiting wood uniformly. Trim the limbs around the outside of the tree shorter to allow better light exposure to the lowest new limbs. Help train new shoots off the trunk to go outward, not straight up.

Year 3 (summer): Return to the top of your tree and remove about half of the new shoots that have once again risen near the heaviest pruning cuts. Remove the most vigorous shoots first. When the third dormant period comes, continue to shape the tree by shortening the outer branches by a foot or two. Spread the new fruiting wood evenly over the entire tree from the lowest limbs to the upper scaffolds. Your tree should now allow very good light and air penetration to all of the limbs. All areas of the tree should now be accessible from a ladder.

Old Lilacs:

Neglected lilacs can be renewed or rejuvenated by pruning. You have two options depending on how much you prize the blooms. One is to bring the lilac back into shape by cutting the entire plant back to within 6 to 8 inches of the ground in late winter (February or early March). Although this method eliminates blooms for two years, the severe pruning induces lots of shoots to develop during the spring and summer. Next year, in late winter, select several strong and healthy shoots to form the shrub framework. Remove all of the others at ground level. Head (cut) back the retained shoots to just above a bud to encourage branching.

To preserve some of the floral buds, the other option is to cut back the plant over a three-year period. Begin by removing one-third of the large, old stems at ground level. Next year at this same time, prune out one-half of the remaining old stems. Also, thin out some of the new growth. Retain several well-spaced, vigorous stems and remove all the others.

In February of the third year, remove all of the remaining old wood. Do additional thinning of the new shoots. **Since lilac wood needs to be 3 or more years of age before it blooms**, this method should allow you to enjoy flowers every spring. When properly pruned, an overgrown lilac becomes an attractive shrub within a few years. Once rejuvenated, pruning should be part of the maintenance program. Keep old lilacs healthy and vigorous by removing a few of the oldest branches every 3 to 5 years.

Adapted by Cecilia from article by Don Tapio (GH County Extension Agent)

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