

Pruning apple 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 regrow.

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/ diseased branches
- C. Downward-growing branches
- D. Rubbing or criss-crossing branches
- E. Upward/ inward growing interior branches
- F. Competing leaders

3. Pruning Young Trees

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. In production orchards, trees are generally pruned to a 'goblet' shape to allow light and air into the middle of the tree.

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.

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 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.