

Guidance on Garden Orchard and Fruit Tree Management

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Introduction

Fruit trees have long been a characteristic feature of the Malvern Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). The practice of growing fruit for direct consumption and for making Cider and Perry in the area is many centuries old. Many fruit trees can still be found in the area today, be they in a domestic garden or larger orchard. They continue to provide a source of nourishment, a valuable habitat for wildlife and a living link to our past.

The purpose of this guidance

When moving to a property, many people inherit one or more fruit trees or even a small orchard, yet may have little idea of how to manage them. These notes are intended to enable you to look after your garden fruit tree, be it a single apple tree or part of a small orchard.



Local apple varieties



Garden apple tree

Assess what you have

Before doing anything, make an assessment of what you have, the number of trees, what type they are - apple, pear, plum etc. and what condition they seem to be in, young or old, healthy or sickly? You do not need to be an expert to do this; just write a few basic notes based on your observations. Knowing what variety your fruit tree is, when it ripens and if its fruit will store are important factors that will influence how you manage it. One of the best ways of identifying varieties is to take them along to a local Apple Day event (in September/October).

Decide what you want from your tree(s)

In the context of your property what do you want from your tree(s)? Is it to look good in the garden and the wider landscape, to be of benefit to wildlife or to get as much fruit as possible? Your answer may well be more than one of these and in many cases they are not incompatible. If you have old and declining trees you might want to consider planting a few young trees to form the next generation. See Consider Planting a New Fruit Tree(s) below.

Pruning

DECIDE WHETHER TO PRUNE OR NOT

The subject of pruning fruit trees can often seem confusing and off-putting, but it is really not that complicated if a few basic rules are followed. There are a range of reasons why you might want to prune a fruit tree:

- to get better quality fruit;
- to let light and air into the tree, and so help minimise disease outbreaks;
- to control or maintain the size of the tree;
- to remove damaged or diseased sections of the tree;
- to rebalance a tree to keep it from falling over.

It is not the case that pruning is always the answer. If you have a large tree that is not causing any issues with the space it occupies and you are not greatly concerned about the level of fruit production then leaving well alone may well be the right option for you.

If you do decide pruning is for you there are a few basic principles to follow.

Pruning - basic principles

OLDER TREES

- Aim to reduce excessive weight in the crown (or top of the tree). The biggest threat to old trees is often that they are unevenly balanced with more weight on one side of the tree than the other, and so reducing a few heavy limbs on one side can prevent or slow their collapse.
- Cut out badly diseased or damaged twigs and branches. Whilst it is not possible to completely eradicate the likes of canker, it can be contained by cutting it out as much as possible. Leaving some deadwood in a tree is valuable habitat for insects and birds, and deadwood will not harbour disease.
- Where two branches cross or rub against each other, aim to remove one - usually the weaker one.
- Thin out overly congested areas of the crown to let light and air into the tree.
- Don't prune out more than 30% of the tree in any one year.

YOUNGER TREES

- Look to create structure and shape. Prune out inward facing branches, which are those heading back into the middle of the tree and which may rub on another branch, rather than those going away from the centre.



inward growing branch

- Try to create a wine glass or goblet shaped tree, something with a clean stem and a nice rim of branches with some space in the middle.

Always prune to just above an outward facing bud (see illustration overleaf).

Further info: A few varieties are so called 'tip bearers' and require different pruning techniques. They fruit on the tips of last season's growth and not along the length of the branch. Pruning these is more complicated - see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fruit_tree_pruning for an example.



Young tree pruned in a goblet shape

When to prune

APPLE & PEAR TREES - traditionally these are pruned in the autumn or winter when the tree has lost its leaves and is dormant and it is far easier to see what you are doing. However you can actually prune apples and pears on any day of the year, and some people believe the cuts heal better if made in the growing season. However, it is a lot harder to see what you are doing when the tree is in full leaf. Some of the fancy trained forms like fans, espaliers and cordons are always summer pruned. For this see www.gardenersworld.com/how-to/projects/pruning-training/how-to-prune-apple-trees-in-summer/14.html

STONE FRUIT - PLUMS, CHERRIES, DAMSONS AND GAGES

These must be pruned in spring/summer when the sap is up, as there is a fatal fungal disease called silver leaf which can infect them if they are pruned in the winter. Therefore if you are not bothered about sacrificing some of the fruit, prune in May. If you want the crop then prune immediately after harvesting. Pruning in the growing season like this is more difficult as it is harder to see what you are doing with all the leaves on, but so serious is the threat of silver leaf, we have no choice but to summer prune stone fruit.

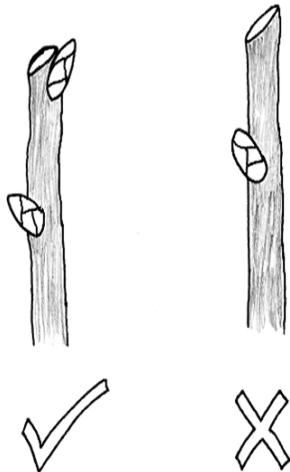
Tools of the trade



Pruning tools

To carry out clean, effective pruning you will need a few good tools: a pair of secateurs, loppers and a pruning saw. Make sure that you know how to use these tools safely and always clean them well after use.

Taking the Plunge



Pruning points

Half the battle with pruning is having the courage to get stuck in. Again there are one or two simple practices to follow.

Start off by looking at where the tree is clearly overcrowded and needs thinning out. When cutting back small gauge growth with secateurs and loppers, do so to just above an outward facing bud so any new growth goes away from the centre of the tree to form the desired open or goblet shaped tree.

When cutting larger gauge branches with the saw, try to cut back to a junction or fork so as not to leave ugly stubs, and when cutting back to the trunk or a major branch, leave a clean cut just above the collar. It is best to take large branches off in two or more sections with the last cut removing just a short stub. This minimises the risk of tearing the trunk bark.



A clean cut just above the collar



Well made cuts can heal over

When carrying out any pruning, it pays to do a bit, take a step back and have a look, then do a bit more, as it is easy to lose the overall picture of what you are trying to achieve when you are in the thick of the tree. When finished, the perfectly pruned fruit tree should have no part of it touching or rubbing any other part of the tree - it should have a nice open, airy feel.

Planting a new fruit tree(s)

CONSIDER PLANTING A NEW FRUIT TREE(S)

Fruit trees have a limited life and will not last as long as something like an oak. On average, an apple tree will live for 100 to 120 years, while a pear can go on for 200 years or so. Plums by contrast tend to die off within 50 or 60 years.

So if you have old trees, consider adding a few young ones. Fruit trees are grafted onto different sized rootstocks, so when purchasing make sure you select the right sized tree for your space. See www.walcotnursery.co.uk/acatalog/rootstocks-for-fruit-trees.html

WHAT TO PLANT

When considering planting a new fruit tree, ask yourself what you already have and what you like. If you already have apples you may opt for a plum or pear.

Once you have decided what type of fruit, consider the variety. There is a wide range of heritage varieties of the West Midlands, so rather than plant a variety you could easily get in the shops, why not plant a local rarity and have something a bit special that you will never see in a garden centre. A list, together with descriptions, can be found at www.worcestershireorchards.co.uk. Information

on Herefordshire varieties can be supplied by the Colwall Orchard Group (see opposite).

If you want to try before you buy, why not visit an Apple Day or the famous Pershore Plum Festival to see what tickles your taste and then track down a young tree of your chosen variety.

Looking after old trees

As fruit trees age and decay they become a fantastic wildlife habitat, providing holes for nesting birds and food for rare wood-boring insects. Indeed, old fruit trees are one on the most important habitats for wildlife in the AONB, especially where they exist in areas containing other fruit trees. So ideally keep old trees going for as long as you can. If possible, leave some wood from dead and decayed fruit trees in a pile in a quiet, out of the way place in your garden.

Waste not

Every year thousands of apples, pears and plums rot on the ground whilst the shops are full of imported fruit. If you have a glut, why not investigate preserving or juicing. Your local Transition Group or a local orchard group might hold community juicing days or might make good use of your surplus. Also check out a book like Bob Flowerdew's 'Grow Your Own, Eat Your Own' which has lots of tips on dealing with an abundant harvest.

Whatever you have, enjoy your fruit trees - they are a wonderful resource for a source of fresh fruit, a wildlife habitat or a place to sit in the shade.

For a short film on pruning and the orchards of the Wyre Forest see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WG7IsheFHuQ&list=UUCHHRjoUZQtQWxSMWHcAQEg&index=2&feature=plcp>

Useful sources of information

For more detailed and specific information on orchard management, see http://www.naturalengland.org.uk/about_us/news/2010/171210.aspx

For advice on pruning young trees, see <http://www.walcotnursery.co.uk/acatalog/pruning-fruit-trees-and-bushes.html>

For further pruning advice, see <http://www.frankmatthews.com/pruningandaftercare.htm>

For information on Gloucestershire varieties and lots more see www.gloucestershireorchardgroup.org.uk



Fruiting buds

For information on Worcestershire varieties, history etc., see www.worcestershireorchards.co.uk

For information on apples and apple growing in the Marches area, see www.marcherapple.net

For an interesting project evaluating orchards in Herefordshire, see www.herefordorchards.co.uk

For information on a successful community orchard project run in and around the village of Colwall in Herefordshire, see www.colwallorchardgroup.org



Garden apple trees

Text and images courtesy of Worcestershire County Council and the Colwall Orchard Group.

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