**Pruning fruit trees**

**When:** Late winter, around February, when the tree has no leaves (dormant), making it easier to see the branches. (peach and cherry trees should be pruned in August when the weather is dry)

**How much:** *Don't remove more than ⅓ of the tree's branches at once* - heavy pruning can lead to excessive branch growth the following year.

**How to prepare:**

- [Sharpen your bypass pruners and loppers](#) (excellent short video) by filing the blade at about a 20° angle from the inside to the end. Run the flat side of the file along the back of the blade to remove any burrs.
- If you suspect that your tree has a disease, [clean your pruners](#) between cuts with alcohol or disinfectant wipes (like Lysol or other surface disinfectant) or 9:1 water:bleach solution (bleach can be corrosive).
- Use [thinning cuts](#)--cut branches close to the limb just above the branch collar (the ridged ring where it attaches to the tree), without leaving a stub. This "thinning cut" is the one you'll use most often--does not promote watersprouts - vertical, fast-growing shoots that won't bear fruit growth.
- Use [heading cuts](#) sparingly (cutting it back along its entire length, shortening the branch without removing it entirely--like amputating your arm at the elbow). Heading cuts promote watersprouts.

**Where to start? Easy! Prune off:**

1. Vertical branches ([watersprouts](#)) and [suckers](#)
2. Downward-growing branches
3. Crossing and rubbing branches
4. Branches showing signs of disease or damage
5. Branches growing toward the interior of the tree to improve airflow and reduce the risk of fungal disease

**Yay!! Most of your pruning is finished!** Consider the following steps next.

6. [Shape the tree like a triangle](#), with shorter branches at the top to allow sunlight to reach the entire tree.
7. Remove branches with very [narrow attachment angles](#) (less than 45°) - they are prone to breaking. Young trees can be [trained with wooden "crutches"](#) to widen these angles.
8. To reduce the height of a tree that's too tall, [cut limbs at the top of the tree to a lateral branch](#) (thinning cut) that is the height you desire. Remember the "⅓ rule." This can also be done in summer when regrowth is not as vigorous.
9. To remove larger branches, use the [3-cut method](#) to prevent injuring the tree.

**Summer pruning-** when you prune in summer, you're putting your tree on a diet by removing some of their little green solar panels/food-making factories that feed the roots, so prune judiciously.

- If you prune in summer, do it no later than the end of June (except for peach and cherry trees) and remove newly grown watersprouts. MG Sara Clark recommends running a gloved hand along the branch where you removed the watersprouts in your early spring pruning to discourage regrowth-she has had good luck with this technique.

**Remember--you can't really make a mistake**--your tree will continue to make new branches.

**You should not prune or treat trees that are over 10 ft. tall.** Get a professional to do it. Better yet, consider replacing old, overgrown trees with dwarf varieties so you'll be able to prune them, and--very important-- find and treat pest or disease problems early and easily!
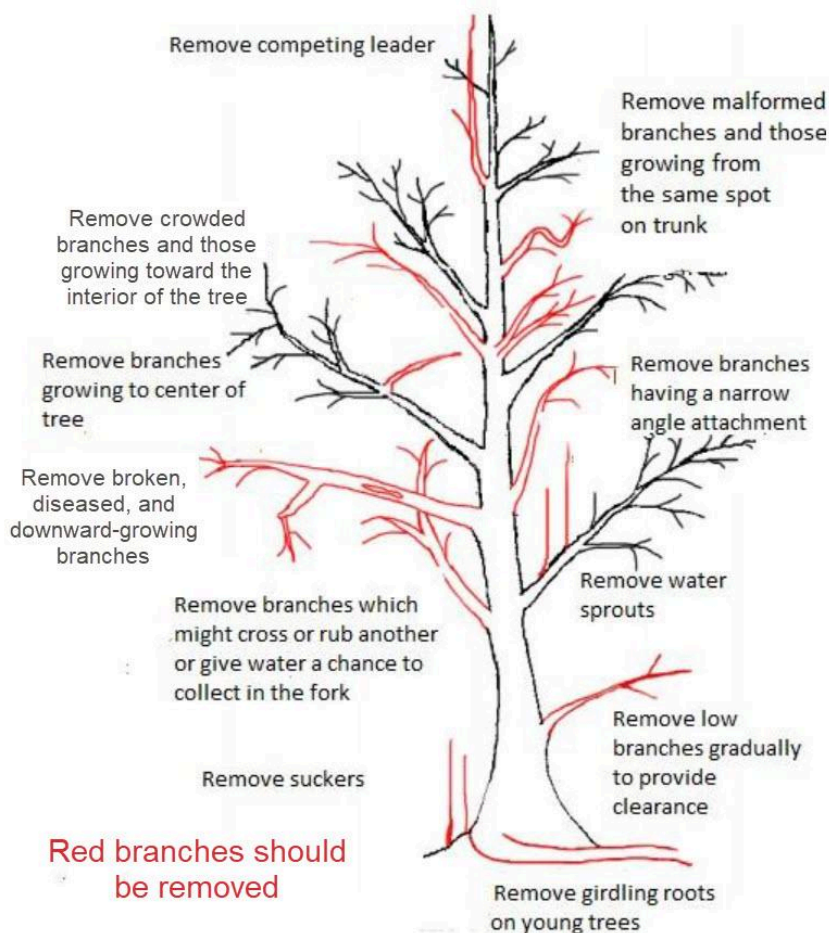
## Resources

**Publications**:
https://extension.oregonstate.edu/catalog/pub/pnw400 (THE BEST! 'Nuff said.)
https://extension.umd.edu/resource/pruningtreeshomelandscape/

**Videos**
Excellent 3-minute video--pruning old apple or pear trees--also good demonstration of thinning cuts. (start at 23 sec.)
Video--pruning and training young apple and pear trees--(4 min.--start at 23 sec.)--worth looking at.



*Illustration of Reasons to Prune Trees (red branches are to be removed)*
*Credit: Don Wittig, former UME Master Gardener*

Image Source:
https://extension.umd.edu/sites/extension.umd.edu/files/styles/optimized/public/2021-03/hgic_trees_reasons_for_pruning_490.jpg?itok=B-8taeEl