D O L A U - H I R I O N F R U I T T R E E S

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RESTORATIVE PRUNING OF FRUIT TREES

Introduction

There are 2 main reasons for pruning established fruit trees:

1. To create or maintain a pleasing shape
2. To increase fruit yield and quality

If your over-riding consideration is one of wildlife conservation, then it is probably best not to prune at all.

Standard and half-standard trees

By definition, standard trees have a trunk height of 6-8 feet and half-standards approximately 4'6".

Most standard perry pear varieties will be grafted onto seedling pear rootstock. Many half-standards will be grafted onto quince. These may be double-grafted. Most standard apple varieties will be grafted onto a vigorous rootstock such as M25 or MM111. Most cider varieties will also have a 'stem graft'. Half-standard apples will be grafted onto MM111 or MM106.

Standard plums will be budded onto Myrobalam (Cherry plum), half-standards onto St. Julien A.

Types of tree

There are 3 main tree shapes:

1. Natural habit
2. Open-centre
3. Delayed open-centre

The natural habit tree is left largely to it's own devices. Lower branches may be removed as necessary to give the required trunk height and overcrowded branches thinned to keep the tree open.

The open-centre tree has had its centre leader tipped 6" above the required trunk height to stimulate the formation of lateral branches. These branches have been cut back again during the following two winters to stimulate further branching. The result is an open-centred tree with up to 12 lateral branches or sub-leaders on which the fruiting spurs are borne.

The delayed open-centre tree begins as a natural habit tree but has had its central leader cut back after a sufficient number of lateral branches have formed naturally.

Your trees will probably be a combination of all 3 types!

Pruning established apple trees for improved fruit yield and quality

The prime objective is to increase air and sunlight penetration by removing some of the surplus timber. Spread the major pruning over at least 3 years.

A tree can be considered to have four parts:

1. Rootstock
2. Stem
3. Skeletal limbs
4. Fruiting branches

You are trying to create a basic structure of a clean stem supporting 5 – 8 large skeletal limbs on which smaller fruiting branches are borne and which are renewed every 5 years.

If the tree has very little new growth and lots of fruit bud, you can afford to prune hard. If there is over 12" of healthy new growth at the end of each branch, prune lightly.

In the 1st year:

Remove all the suckers from the base of the tree – they are probably rootstock. If these are allowed to grow big, they will reduce the tree's vigour.

Similarly, if the tree has a stem graft, remove all the branches originating from the stem. Again, these will reduce the vigour of the main variety.

Remove all dead timber. If wildlife conservation is a major objective, leave some dead wood.

A healthy tree will withstand a certain amount of canker. Don't cut huge branches out just to remove cankers. The result will be a forest of sappy young growth, which will be even more susceptible!

Remove all lower branches that interfere with normal orchard operations such as mowing or are constantly being eaten by stock. Cut back to a suitable juncture – not halfway along.

Remove any branches that cross from one side of the tree to the other. Cut these right off. These restrict air movement.

If the tree has an over-dominant centre leader, consider cutting this off at a suitable juncture, to make a 'delayed open-centre' type shape. This will reduce shading and stimulate the lower branches to grow and fruit.

Remove any branches that are rubbing. Rubbing branches lead to canker.

In the 2nd year:

Remove any branches that are duplicates.

Remove some of the larger fruiting branches leaving about a 1" stub to allow new branches to grow from dormant buds.

In the 3rd and subsequent years:

Continue renewing these fruiting branches as they become old (5 years +) or too large. As these spurs get older, the fruit gets poorer. Encourage new leaders to grow from the main stem.

Additional notes

Cider and perry trees require less pruning than dessert and culinary apple trees, as quality is not the main criterion.

Plum trees should be pruned between May and September to allow wounds to heal quickly and prevent the ingress of disease. Simply remove dead wood and crossing branches as necessary.

Some apple varieties are 'tip-bearers'. These should be pruned as normal but vigorous renewal of the fruiting branches should be avoided.

Useful references and addresses:

Paul Davis, Dolau-hirion Fruit Tree Nursery, Capel Isaac, Llandeilo SA19 7TG. Welsh, traditional Border County and disease-resistant varieties on a full range of rootstocks. Tel: 01558 668744 Email info@applewise.co.uk

Sheila Leitch, Network Coordinator, Marcher Apple Network, Wye View, Glasbury on Wye, Hereford HR3 5NU. Tel: 01497 847354

Chris Fairs, Orcharding Dept., H.P. Bulmers Ltd., The Cider Mills, Plough Lane, Hereford HR4 0LE. Tel: 01432 352000

Wye College National Fruit Collections, Brogdale Road, Faversham, Kent ME13 8XZ

The Fruit Expert, Dr. D.G. Hessayon, pbi Publications. ISBN 0-903505 48 7

The Fruit Garden Displayed (RHS), Harry Baker, pub: Cassell Ltd.
ISBN 0-304-31112X

The Book of Apples, Joan Morgan and Alison Richards. Ebury Press.
ISBN 0-09-177759-3

The English Apple, Rosanne Sanders, Phaidon ISBN 0-7148 2498-4
(out of print)

Paul and Lynne Davis August 2012