Friday’s Feature
By
Theresa Friday
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For a peachy good time, prune trees in the dormant season

Peaches and nectarines are tasty fruits that can be grown in north Florida gardens. Success depends on choosing the right cultivar with an appropriate “chilling requirement” and proper maintenance.

Many fruit trees, once dormant, require accumulated exposure to cool temperatures for budbreak and the resumption of normal growth in the spring. The amount of accumulated cool temperature exposure required for normal growth varies by species and cultivar and is referred to as the chilling requirement. To choose appropriate cultivars for your area in Florida, refer to a University of Florida publication, available online at http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/mg211.

Begin training at planting time
Once planted, it is important to train your tree using proper pruning techniques to develop strong branches that can support heavy fruit loads in future years. Untrained fruit trees usually do not develop growth habits suitable for production of high yields of quality fruit. Begin tree training at planting to minimize the need for later corrective training.

The open-center system
The open-center training system is the method of choice for peaches and nectarines. Open-center trees usually contain from three to four major scaffold limbs with no central leader. It looks very much like a soup-bowl.

The open center allows sunlight to penetrate the canopy and improves air circulation. Since peaches and nectarines trees are prone to many diseases, maximum air circulation is important to keep moisture off the leaves. Too much shading on peach twigs can kill the twig in one growing season and, eventually, no fruiting wood will be present in the lower part of the tree.

Steps to proper pruning
Mature, producing trees are usually pruned during the dormant season (between December and February). One of the first steps is to cut out most, if not all of the vigorous upright growth – often called water sprouts.
Fruit on this type of growth is usually of poor quality and water sprouts contribute greatly to shading lower branches. When cutting out upright growth, it is important to prune it all the way to the branch it originated from or else you will end up with more problems than when you started.

The next step is to prune out any dead, damaged or diseased wood. This type of twig will be obvious with a dried out, grayish appearance. Dead wood is very brittle and can often be broken out by hand.

During the growing season branches and twigs will often break from fruit load or winds. Even though the twig may still be alive, the break wound is attractive to insect pests like the lesser peach tree borer. Cut broken twigs out to at least below the broken area and, preferably, to where the twig originates from the branch.

Finally, cut out any crossing limbs. Fruit grown on crossing limbs will often rub on other branches around them, which may set them up for future disease problems.

Many people are hesitant to prune out much wood, thinking that they are reducing the number of fruit they are going to pick. While the amount of fruit will be reduced with proper pruning, the quality of the remaining fruit will be far superior.

For more information on how to prune your peach tree, contact your local Extension Service or review an online University of Florida publication at http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/hs365.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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