

*Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office*



PHOTO BY Barbara Hankins

Thinning fruits is the hardest of all tasks for the novice peach grower but it must be done to produce a high-quality harvest. Shown above is Master Gardener Jackie Auer thinning peach trees last week at the Demonstration Orchard in Carbide Park.

Most of us especially enjoy seeing blooms produced by fruit trees that signal the end of the winter season. To a commercial peach producer, the sight of colorful blooms signals an approaching task known as fruit thinning. Homeowners should also realize the importance of this not-so-easy task of relieving peach trees of their "overload." Even though you unmercifully pruned the poor creature's branches soon after last year's harvest season was over, the tree

may still have too many peaches on it this spring to produce a high-quality crop later in the summer. Most peach trees in our area produced an unusually heavy set of blooms this spring. This means that most trees are even more likely have too many peaches to produce a high-quality crop of fruits—and that in turn means that some fruits have to go! How does one properly thin the fruit of a peach tree? With determination, will power, vim, and vigor. Be determined that you will re-

move a high percentage of that fruit. Have the will power to stay with the gruesome task until the job is finished. And exert plenty of vim and vigor so that you will have the job finished before your spouse comes home and has you committed for ruining the first decent peach crop that you have ever had! (Note to my high school English teachers and other language aficionados: I know that the words "vim" and "vigor" are basically synonymous—nevertheless, it helps to



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have both when thinning peaches.)

You must be strong! You must make a decision at this point. The decision is whether to have a lot of small, low-quality peaches or a very decent yield of high-quality fruits. Too many fruits on a tree will result in damaged trees and peaches that are mostly pit and little flesh. In an earlier column I mentioned that a properly planted, properly pruned and well-cared for peach tree is capable of producing up to 400 pounds of peaches. It takes about 382 small peaches measuring 3/4" diameter to make a bushel, while it only takes 158 peaches measuring 2 1/2" diameter to make the same bushel.

One bushel of peaches typically weighs 48 to 50 pounds. In other words, you can get ample amounts of inferior size peaches without thinning or you can aim for the larger sized peaches. It's a lot less effort and the end result in total poundage will likely be the same—it's a no brainer. Thinning is the hardest of all tasks for the novice fruit grower. Last week, the Master Gardeners thinned the peach trees in the demonstration orchard in Car-bide Park. I was reminded of how difficult this task is when Barbara Hankins, who recently became a Master Gardener and who took the photo accompanying this column, exclaimed that she would not have had the courage to remove so many baby peaches.

Peaches should be thinned when the fruit is still as small as a dime. The longer the fruit has to mature under the ideally thinned situation, the larger it will get—less competition for nutrients and water equals lar-

ger fruit. How late in the season can you wait to thin? If you can easily cut through the pits of the peaches with a sharp knife, then it will be of some benefit to thin. However, remember that the earlier thinning is accomplished, the greater the benefits in terms of fruit size and quality. If you only have one or a few trees in the back yard, it's easy enough to remove them by hand—just give them a little twist, and off they come. Fruit should be thinned until all peaches are at least 5-to-6 inches apart on the branch and there are no twin (or side-by-side) fruit.

When thinning, look at the number of fruit remaining on the tree and not at the ground. Looking at the ground will likely prevent you from removing enough fruit. Excessive fruit load can cause tree limbs to break. Excessive fruit set often will also result in small fruit with poor flavor. One more cautionary note: Excessive fruit set also can result in alternate bearing in which a tree will produce little or no fruit in the year following a large fruit crop. Commercial growers go a step further and tie an 18-to-24 inch length of rope or rubber hose on the end of a wood stick, and knock the fruit off with this device. The rubber hose will not injure the limb upon impact. There is usually some natural drop of fruit later on in the year, whether you have thinned or not, but even with this, it is important to do the preliminary hand thinning.

When you complete this task, the ground will be covered with small peaches, and you probably will feel that you have lost your entire crop. But in reality, at harvest time you will likely realize

that you did not thin enough. I thinned a peach tree a few years ago and counted the number of fruits. I had removed more than one thousand peaches! (Peaches were thinned at the half-dime diameter stage; trees normally abort a portion of the initial fruit set as fruits enlarge.) The pretty picture of the mammoth peach in sale advertisements will not occur in your backyard unless you have the determination and make the effort to thin. If you don't, then get ready for the pits—peach pits, that is!

