

Pruning Peach Trees

Peaches have been grown in Texas for more than one hundred years. They have become established as commercial crops at Pittsburg, Fredericksburg, Tyler, Mexia, Weatherford, and Montague, where deep, well-drained soil, proper varieties and chilling, and good orchard management make crops successful. In addition to these factors, the performance of peach trees depends heavily on proper pruning annually.



Peach pruning is a hard, labor-intensive cultural practice that is easy to avoid or compromise. However, if peach trees are left unpruned, the result is weak trees, overproduction, increased disease, and most important, short tree life. Peaches bloom and bear fruit on second-year wood; therefore, the trees need to make good growth each spring and summer to insure a crop for the next year. Each winter, a large number of red 18- to 24-inch shoots need to be present as fruiting wood. If the trees are not pruned annually, the volume of fruiting wood reduces each year, and the fruiting shoots move higher and higher, becoming out of reach. Alternate-year pruning results in excessive growth the year following heavy pruning, so annual, moderate pruning is essential for the long-term control of tree vigor and fruiting wood.

Late spring frost is the most significant factor in Texas peach production, and the grower does not want to prune too early. The peach tree will bloom soon after pruning when chilling is satisfied and warm weather follows. Growers with only a few trees can wait until 'pink bud' to prune. Growers with large crops should not prune earlier than necessary. Pruning in Texas should occur at least by February, just prior to bloom in March.

The main idea in pruning is to remove old, gray-colored, slow-growing shoots, which are non-fruitful. However, leave one-year-old, 18- to 24-inch red bearing shoots. Removing 40 percent of the tree annually stimulates new growth each spring. The second objective of pruning is to lower the fruiting zone to a height that makes hand harvesting from the ground possible. A third objective is to open the center of the tree; this increases air circulation, reduces disease pressure, and allows sunlight into the tree to accelerate fruit color. Another goal of pruning is to remove diseased or dead shoots, rootstock suckers, and water shoots.

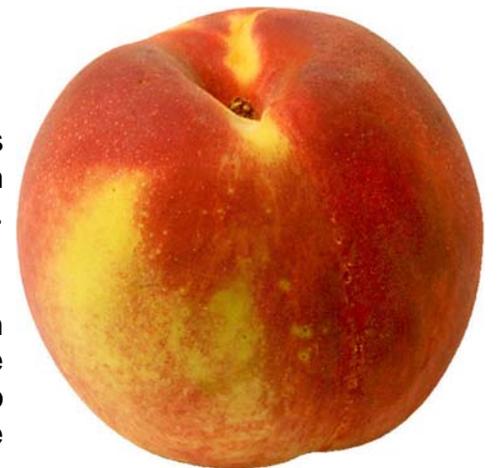
How to Prune a Mature Peach Tree

Step One

Remove all hanger shoots, rootstock suckers, and water sprouts in the lower three feet of the tree. This stripping of lower growth clears a path for herbicide applications, and allows air circulation.

Step Two

Remove all shoots above 7 feet other than red 18- to 24-inch fruiting shoots. Cuts need to be at selected points where the scaffold and sub-scaffold limbs extend upward at a 45- to 50-degree angle. Cuts which leave limbs sideways at a 90-degree angle should be avoided.

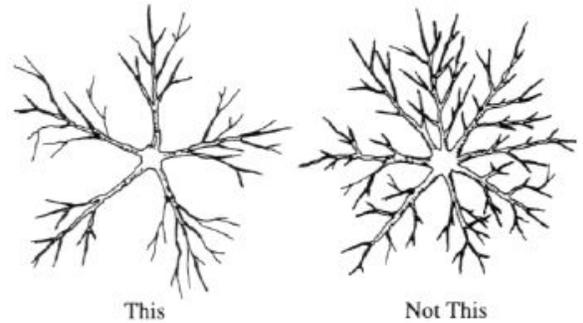


Step Three

Remove all shoots which grow toward the inside of the tree.

Step Four

Remove all old, gray wood in the 3- to 7-foot fruit production zone.



A few additional pointers that should be helpful in pruning your peach trees are:

Always remove bull shoots in the middle of the trees whenever they develop. Summer pruning immediately after harvest can help reduce bull shoots in the top of the tree. Pruning paint is not needed. Make good clean cuts and don't leave any stubs. Peach pruning should remove 40 percent of the tree each winter. This reduces the number of fruit on the tree, and stimulates strong growth of fruiting wood each year.

The key to long peach-tree life in Texas is planting in deep, well-drained, sandy soil, control of peach-tree borer, scale insects, and weeds, and correct pruning. Fruiting will depend on escaping spring frosts.



The Texas A&M Agrilife Extension Service
Harrison County Office
102 West Houston
Marshall, Texas 75670
903-935-8413

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