

Ask a Master Gardener

2/9/16

By Marilyn Van Pelt, Carroll County Master Gardener Extension Volunteer

Can a Bird Fly Through It? Apple Tree Pruning

It is said that a bird should be able to fly through your apple tree without touching a branch. Pruning any tree or shrub seems to be the great mystery to many gardeners. I have finally concluded that pruning is not only a science but an art form when working with decorative trees and shrubs; however, apple trees need strategic cuts that encourage fruiting spurs and keep the branches open so that sunlight and air can reach all the ripening fruit. Apple trees should be pruned in late winter, but you can prune into the spring and summer if you must. Pruning apple trees improves the tree's health and fruit production. Most of the critical pruning should take place the first 3 years of an apple tree's life.

All fruit trees benefit from moderate annual pruning but removing more than a third of the tree could stimulate more branches and no fruit. In addition to proper pruning, branches may need to be gently forced into a more open canopy to allow for light and air circulation. This can be accomplished by bending them to as close to horizontal as you can get and securing them with soft rope or twine, staking it to the ground. There are also manufactured spreaders that can accomplish this. Ideally, branches should be in the 10 o'clock and 2 o'clock positions, rather than growing straight up.

When choosing apple tree varieties, it is important to know which varieties do best in our area. Some varieties need cooler climates. Also, knowing which trees are pollinators and which varieties need pollinators is most important. Many nursery catalogues include pollinization compatibility charts or recommend good apple varieties to use as pollinizers. Always read the labels on the trees.

Many people get frustrated when the fruit trees they plant in their gardens seem to take forever to bear fruit. On average, standard size apple tree varieties take from 3 to 5 years to produce. Dwarf varieties of apple trees should start producing earlier, many within the 2nd or 3rd growing season after transplanting. There are other factors that affect when your tree starts to bear.

Location, soil and weather play a big role in successful fruiting. A tree in full to partial shade is fighting an uphill battle. Apple trees can survive in partial shade, but they will take longer to begin bearing fruit. They require some nutrients to survive. But excessively rich soil or heavy fertilization may encourage branch and leaf growth at the expense of fruit production. If buds have been forming and not opening, it is probably the weather that is at fault. A particularly cold, windy winter can damage susceptible flower buds. More likely it would be the result of a late spring frost, especially if the buds have already begun to swell.

Too much fruit doesn't seem like it should be a problem, but there are two drawbacks to over abundance. First, a large fruit set means that the tree's resources are stressed. You usually have to choose between a large harvest of small fruits or a small harvest of good-sized fruits. Secondly, some fruit tree varieties deal with the stress of a large crop by taking a rest the year after a heavy harvest. You can correct both problems by thinning the crop while the fruits are still tiny, about three weeks after bloom time. Remove all but one fruit from each of the spurs or small branch offshoots where the fruit is produced. Leave the largest, hardiest looking fruit to survive.

The apple season in Georgia generally spans mid June through early December. It's best to select apple tree varieties based on our particular apple tree region because of weather conditions and temperature fluctuations. The University of Georgia Cooperative Extension addresses this issue by dividing the state into apple zones, then assigning the most suitable varieties to each zone.

Carroll County is in Zone 3. Ideal types for this apple zone are Ginger Gold, Gala, Mollie's Delicious, Ozark Gold, Red Delicious, Jonagold, Golden Delicious, Fuji, Mutzu, Yates and Granny Smith.

Confession: I have several apple trees that don't produce very well. Although I prune them, some are probably poor choices for this area, planted in the wrong place or they have diseases and pest problems that I don't address very well. This is a topic for another article. The truth is, many fruit trees need a schedule of care. If it's been at least 5 years and you've provided your fruit tree with good care and growing conditions and still nothing, contact a Carroll County Master Gardener Extension Volunteer at 770-836-8546, via e-mail at ccmg@uga.edu or visit our office in the Ag Center at 900 Newnan Road in Carrollton.