

# HOME & GARDEN

## The finer points of fruit tree pruning

By PAT LEUCHTMAN  
Recorder Columnist

The spring fruit tree pruning exhibition at Clarkdale Fruit Farm, sponsored by the Cooperative Extension Service, has become a popular annual event. There was a good turnout last week when Tom Clark illustrated the finer points of fruit tree pruning and maintenance.

I was impressed, as were the other attendees, by the methods Clarkdale uses to prevent animal damage. Each tree had an 18-inch hardware cloth mouseguard around the trunk. Though there was a heavy hay mulch around the trees for weed control, there was also an area about 2 feet in diameter around the trunk that was mulched with gravel. This discourages mice that might nest in the hay during the winter from easily finding their way to the trunk, which might promise a delectable meal. The mouseguard is an additional precaution.

### BETWEEN THE ROWS

Besides the measures taken against mice, many of the younger trees also had 4- or 5-foot chicken wire cages built around them to discourage deer. These trees were also festooned with bags of human hair. (Tom advised us to get hair from a barbershop rather than a beauty parlor, the reason being that women often have their hair washed before it is cut, and clean hair is not as effective a deterrent.)

In case there was any question about the efficacy of the hair bags, Tom had tacked pieces of creosote-soaked felt to stakes near the trees. He said these methods had proved successful in repelling deer.

Tom showed us some young trees that had been planted two or three years earlier. These had received only minimal pruning — if indeed they had been pruned at all. Tom said to remove any branches that had died or broken off raggedly, but it was important not to overprune when the tree had not yet reached bearing age. Young trees need all their leaves, which are the food producing organs of the tree, to grow strong and sturdy.

Tom recommends pruning to encourage the development of a strong central leader structure with whorls of scaffold branches placed evenly around the tree.

The central leader should be "tipped" every year, that is, cut back about one-third to one-half the growth made the previous year — cut back to a bud.

Tom says he chooses a tip bud growing to the north or west, the direction of his prevailing winds. He wants the tree to grow into the wind.

He doesn't generally tip back the side or scaffold branches unless they grow taller than the central leader.

The thing to remember about the pruning cut is that it should be a clean, slanting cut next to a bud or branch and that no stub should be left that would encourage disease or rot.

Several things can be achieved by intelligent pruning. You want to eliminate weak or unproductive sections of the tree, maintain the proper spacing of branches that will allow enough sunlight and air circulation and maintain the manageable height and desirable form.

To accomplish this, Tom had several suggestions. First he recommended that you stand back from the tree to observe it



Recorder/Chuck Blake



Recorder/Chuck Blake

Onlookers watch as Tom Clark points out the amount of growth made by a young apple tree in one year, before "tipping."

Proper pruning requires the making of a diagonal cut close to an outward facing bud or branch,

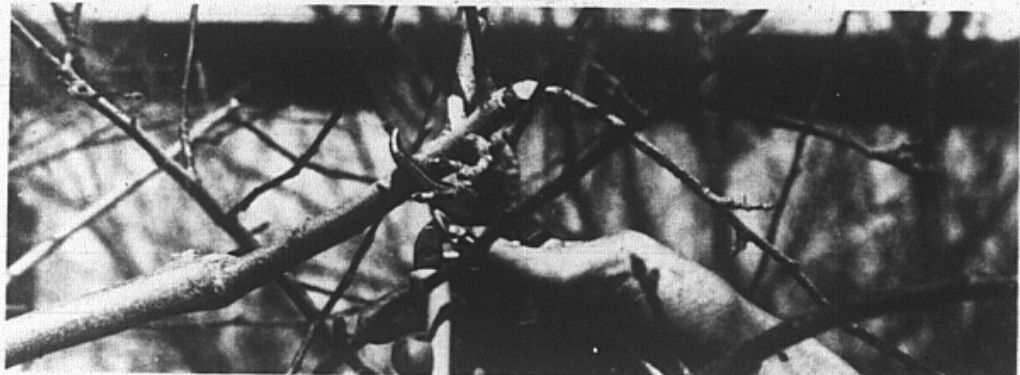
carefully and form a picture in your mind of the ideal shape that particular tree might take, and then remove the branches that are not necessary to that vision.

Tom said that we would all find our own methods of pruning as we gained experience with our own trees and that everyone had his own style, but there are some guidelines to follow. Remove a branch if:

- it is rubbing against another branch,
- it is trying to fill up the center of the tree,
- it shades a good fruit bearing branch below it,
- it is broken, damaged or diseased.

Suckers growing up from the root should be removed, and Tom mentioned that the Malling VII dwarf root stock tended to produce suckers. Water sprouts, those suckers that grow straight up from a branch, can be removed in the summer by a sharp pull and they won't grow back again.

Training and pruning a young tree and maintaining it when it begins to bear is not a big job, but a little bit should probably be done every year. It's nice to have an excuse to go out and carefully inspect the trees early in the spring when there are so few garden chores to do.



Recorder/Chuck Blake

Cut close to the main branch so that no stub remains to catch water and rot or to provide a place for disease.