

Fall Tips for Healthy Fruit Trees

By Bobbi Gustafson



Take steps now to help ensure a bountiful harvest next year.

As fall approaches, you may find yourself making hot cider, baking fresh apple pies, and pursuing other activities that seem to become priorities as each year draws to a close. It's a satisfying feeling to prepare and save the fruit you have grown, and taking a few steps to care for your fruit trees now can make a big difference in your harvest next year.

It's time to mow under your trees and remove the cuttings. They may have insects and larvae in them that can infest an orchard of any variety, so bag them and get them away from the trees.

Wrap strips of corrugated cardboard around tree trunks, 1 foot above the ground, with the corrugation running vertically. As codling moth larvae search for a place to pupate for the winter, they will crawl into the cardboard. Change these strips per week; burn or bag them and put them in the garbage. Remember also to pick up fallen fruit every day. Go through the pile and remove all fruit with holes in it first to prevent any larvae from escaping. Put these scraps in a tightly sealed bag and toss it in your garbage can.

When using apple maggot traps in early fall, hawthorn and crabapple trees should be included. They can be looked upon as both a host plant and a decoy.

To help prevent winter sunscald, make a 50/50 mixture of basic white, additive-free, latex paint and water, then paint it on the southwest side of your trees.

If you have rabbits in your area, consider installing a temporary "fence" of hardware cloth around your tree trunks to keep rabbits from stripping the bark. And remember: A foot or two of snow will give rabbits a handy "footstool" to help them over your fence, so make it tall enough to accommodate a deep snowfall. If a fence is too much hassle for you, user-friendly plastic tubes are also available for trunk protection.

Encourage helpful creatures to live around your orchard. Bats, swallows and black cap chickadees eat tremendous numbers of insects. To draw them in, provide a water source, nesting places and shrubbery for protection from predators, plus some supplemental food.

Need more help managing insect pests? Fall is the perfect time to plan for an alternative to pesticide sprays on your driveways and fence lines. For an extra bit of assistance, put out the welcome mat for beneficial insects by planting the "host" plants they love (see sidebar). Beneficial insects, such as parasitic wasps and hover flies, feed off the nectar of tiny flowers and lay their eggs inside the bodies of pesky worms, fly larvae and other insect pests.

Adding a nonliving mulch is a good idea, too. A mulch of this type will let water penetrate easily and retain moisture, while providing good cover for other beneficial insects. A few well-placed stones will attract centipedes, which are voracious predators.

If you're considering a living mulch, choose one that will go dormant during the hot months, so as not to compete with the tree for water and nutrients. Vetch, red clover and bell bean are good choices, because these will build nitrogen in the soil.

Finally, get a soil test to determine its pH level, which should be between 6.3 and 6.8. If the pH is too low (acidic), you can spread lime according to the label directions. Using compost tends to slowly nudge soil pH toward a more alkaline state, too. If your soil pH is too high (alkaline), you can lower it by adding elemental sulfur according to package instructions. If calcium levels are low, gypsum will supply it without lowering the pH. Adding a 2-inch-deep layer of compost around each tree's drip line (after you've removed all other organic debris) provides a slow-release fertilizer and encourages earthworms.

Now get out your seed catalogs and pour yourself a cup of that warm, spiced cider. Put a scoop of vanilla on your apple pie. Then sit by the fire and start planning for 2008. You only have three months to go.

Good plants for good bugs

Fall is the perfect time to offer the types of flora to which beneficial insects are drawn. A veritable army of "good" insects will return the favor by happily attacking the insects that cause problems in your garden. Here's a list of "host" plants that welcome beneficial insects with open arms.

parsley	sage	rosemary	thyme	dill
bacopa	germander	pyracantha	fennel	coriander
winter savory	chamomile	oregano	marjoram	lemon balm
mustard	clover	yarrow	allysum	

mints (grow them in a pot; they're invasive)

Fruit trees workshop

WHAT: "Best Fall Practices for Healthy Fruit Trees"— a free WSU Know & Grow workshop, will tell you when to harvest and how best to prepare your fruit trees for overwintering and healthy spring growth. Presented by WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners, in partnership with the WSU Northwestern Washington Research and Extension Center

WHEN: Tuesday, Oct. 16, 1:00 to 2:30 p.m.

WHERE: WSU-NWREC Auditorium, 16650 Memorial Highway (Highway 536), West of Mount Vernon

SPEAKERS: WSU/Skagit County Extension horticulturist Gary Moulton and WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardener Larry Mowrer

Ideas and topics for future WSU Know & Grow workshops are welcome. Contact the WSU Master Gardener program at 360.428.4270.



Almost any kind of ground cover will serve as a living mulch for mature fruit trees. This gardener chose strawberries. (Photo by Jason Miller)



Cherries, peaches, pears... many varieties of each perform well in Skagit County. (Photo by Jason Miller)



When the last pear is picked, it's time to start thinking about preparing your fruit trees for winter.
(Photo by Jason Miller)

REFERENCES:

- “Tree Fruits,” Organic Production Overview (ATTRA backed by the US Department of Agriculture)
- *Organic Gardening*, EB 0648
- E-mail interview with Deborah Ann Pehrson, manager of WSU orchard in Pullman, Wash.
- PNW 550, “Encouraging beneficial insects in your garden”

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