

# Pruning - why we do it



Recently I had a Croatian chap ring me for some advice. He'd bought a Cox's Orange and a Pine Golden Pippin from me a few years ago.

They just had their first decent crop and he wanted to know what to "do" with them now. I figured out that "to do" was how to prune them and as our conversation continued I had to think of the whole training/pruning thing - how complicated it is and how on earth I can explain in a telephone call or short article like this what it all means.

This chap did say something interesting though and that was: his family said - "don't prune the trees, just let them grow as nature intended them to grow" - and I thought - this is a great starting point: the first of many misconceptions about gardening is that it's "natural".

It may seem natural to have a garden to someone who lives on the 10th floor of an apartment building living in a completely manmade world - although in reality gardens, gardening, horticulture, agriculture are about as anti-nature as you can get. Agriculture usually consists of eradicating what once was growing there and starting on a nice piece of ground, change the character of the soil by adding lime and fertilizers, and "landscaping" by taking out rocks and fencing it from wildlife. Australia's gardening is a great example of this and though we pay lip service to Australian flora, as soon as we start to grow natives in our gardens we Europeanise them by changing their character and making them our own e.g. instead of lank and scrawny we make them short and bushy. Instead of sparse stunted yellow foliage we pump them with nitrogen and potash and very soon it's all about us and not them - though of course the myth goes on.

We transform our garden environment into one that suits our end - both aesthetical and practical - whether its beautiful and fragrant roses or tasty home grown peas (tasted some lately?) it is for our end and not that of nature in general. That we do want to prune - is very human, it's domesticating and controlling.

To come back to my Croatian friend: both Cox's Orange and Pine Golden Pippin are smallish apples and if he follows his family's advice, these trees would become even more twiggy and produce even smaller apples, although probably more of them. The 10 kg of apples the young tree produces would number say 100 fruits. If he pruned and thinned correctly he'd still had 10 kg, but only 40-50 fruits, but big splendid ones with a higher fruit / flesh to core ratio than the little ones. Of course nature is concerned with spreading the seeds around and produce ever more apple trees than nice big succulent fruits. Now they are more what we are after, so we cut out the thin growth, prune to an underneath bud or weigh down the branches with a milk carton full of water. Horizontal branches produce fruiting buds, upright branches just leaves. We shape the tree so it's bushy and close to the ground for easy picking, cut out the upright growth and even arrive at the point of removing fruiting buds if they are too close together on the stem. Later we thin out the fruits to a number the tree can handle.

Many apples, pears and plums have a biennial fruiting habit - a massive crop one year and almost nothing the next. Good pruning practise on buds and thinning of surplus fruit prevents the trees from exhausting themselves and bring them back to annual cropping.

It's very human to put in a nice little tree next to a path or fence or under a window and 5 years later - BANG - you have this big adolescent tree in the way! And it's very human to then cut hell out of it to try and contain it. But what does the tree do? It reacts by putting all it's efforts into trying to grow as big as it was - and while doing this puts it's effort into growth and not fruit... Then we chop it down again and tell everybody that the tree is no good.

One way to avoid this is not to buy those large apple trees grafted onto seedling rootstocks that you see each winter in garden centres. These trees are grown especially for the home garden market. Orchardists buy small trees on dwarfing rootstocks that are easier to contain in size and start to crop much earlier in their lives - often in their second year. The pruning actually starts at the point of sale. Seek these trees out. Heavy pruning creates an environment in which a tree wants to react and put out more growth. What we want is that it gets into fruiting cycle and puts it's efforts into growing apples and not branches and leaves. And never, ever do what the books tell you and pull off those first little fruits. They are the return on your investment, leave them and watch them develop and the little trees efforts will inspire you to care for it even more. When you eat the first produce from your new orchard you'll really have a glow of satisfaction. Incidentally, it really pays to cover up those first apples or cherries with an onion bag or an orange bag net. Others also have eyes on that developing fruit and it's devastating to go out one

morning and find that where hung yesterday a tasty apply almost ready to pick is on the ground a few scraps of skin or a hollowed out shell.

When someone asks how to prune a tree, the answer is: What sort of tree do you want? Traditionally for about the last 100 years in Australia an open vase shaped tree was the norm. This method consisted of very hard pruning to outward growing branches, which put off bearing for 5 or 6 or more years. Today's orchardists are much more concerned about early bearing and pruning and training methods are directed towards early flowering and fruiting. In a home garden environment growing a tree upon a wall or as an espalier (see my other articles) is a great way to produce fruit in a small area. However to produce an espalier tree the technique is totally different to a vase shape. Many orchards today are what is known as spindle bush trees: a central trunk with horizontal branches something like the shape of a Christmas tree, grown on wires and only 1 m apart. This method needs specialised cultivation but is rewarded (if you do it well) with amazingly heavy crops very early in the trees life. These trees are never pruned which makes the old fellas really scratch their heads.

Apples are just like people; some are tall and thin, others short, some prolific and showy, others with hidden charms. In order to successfully grow them we have to know these hidden characteristics and utilize them for our own ends (optimum fruiting). Some varieties form lots of fruiting spurs - too many - and others grow their fruit out on the tips of branches. Some want to grow tall and lanky. One reason why Red Delicious became so popular was the fact that it was such a giving variety - easy to grow and prolific. Orchardists loved it and were reluctant (still are) to let it go. What ever training and pruning methods you use, if it's fruit you're after the idea is to keep the trees at this perpetually sexually mature stage of their life, renewing them annually (pity you can't do it with people!) so they keep on producing. Though in the end it is very brutal - when the poor old trees have gone so far as not to be productive anymore we rip them out and discard them - the final and ultimate pruning job!

More thoughts about pruning in my GRAPE article.

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