PRUNING AND TRAINING APPLE TREES

In order to help the apple tree to produce high quality fruit annual training and pruning are required. Training is the process of selecting limbs that will eventually support the weight of the fruit – the skeleton of the tree. Training and pruning a tree can be difficult if you do not know what you are doing and in some cases you can do more harm than good.

When training an apple tree it is important select limbs that have wide crotch angles.

Limbs with narrow attachments to the trunk are not as strong those limbs that attach almost perpendicular to the trunk. Narrow crotch angles can break under a crop load or excessive icing during the winter. Make sure that when choosing the bottom limbs of the tree that they are the desired height from the ground. Limbs that are too low may make the tree difficult to mow around and limbs which are too high may result in fruit that cannot be reached from the ground.

SHAPING THE TREE

Most commercial apple growers will prune and train their trees in the shape of a Christmas tree. This means that their longest limbs are going to be the bottom branches and the limbs will get progressively shorter as you go up the tree. This type of training improves sunlight penetration into the tree, which helps with disease control and better fruit quality.
SPREADING THE LIMBS

Types of limb spreaders metal, wood, string

Most apple varieties want to grow very upright and the limbs do not want to spread. In order to get the tree to spread it might be necessary to lower them using limb spreaders. Limb spreaders can be purchased, however pieces of wood, nails, and even string can be used to place limbs in the desired position. When spreading limbs, try to get them as horizontal as possible. Also, make sure to remove the string before it can girdle the twig.

Once the limbs have been spread they can be shortened to the appropriate length (remember longer branches on the bottom and shorter ones on the top). Pruning the branches back will stiffen the limb. Pruning will also encourage lateral twig growth and fruit bud formation.

WORKING THE TREE TOP

Usually in the tops of trees you will have numerous upright limbs. Most of these limbs can be pruned out, leaving one to become your main trunk. If the tree is a dwarf or semidwarf, and is at its desired height, then pruning out all upright growth should keep the tree at the height you want. You will want to prune to a sideways growing limb to minimize the number of resprouts.
Once you have finished, the tree should have a very open look to it. Many people are concerned about pruning out too much wood and think they are killing the tree. Pruning during the winter, however, is actually an invigorating process for the tree. Most trees will respond to a good pruning by putting out vigorous growth the following growing season.

Another misconception is that apple trees can only be pruned during the winter. Apple trees can be pruned almost any time of year - except fall. In fact, summer pruning may be needed to open the tree back up for better sunlight penetration and air circulation.

Remember to use these basic principles when training your apple tree. Also, realize that many different apple varieties have unique growing habits so it may be necessary to alter your training to fit the variety.