

Pruning key to a successful harvest

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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Spring has finally arrived. Seeing all the fruit trees in bloom once again is truly one of the wonderful advantages of living in Solano County. My personal favorites are the peach and nectarine trees with their pink blossoms. Together with the yellow mustard growing underneath and a deep blue sky above, I always think of an impressionist painting.

For the farmer, though, early springtime does not just mean lovely blossoms, but a lot of maintenance and care to keep the orchards healthy and profitable.

During the late winter months and well into early spring, all the trees have to be pruned. Old wood is trimmed away on trees that produce only on new wood. Crossed or damaged branches are cut out and the whole tree is shaped to allow maximum sunlight to reach the fruit. This will also give easy access for the fruit pickers and their machinery at harvest time.

Pruning is critical to keeping healthy trees and to produce a profitable crop. But, as Suisun Valley farmer Roy Mason attested: "Pruning is a very monotonous job. You get out there in the wintertime early in the morning when it's real, real cold and the wind is blowing. It's a long day."

Burning the cut branches was and still is a hard job, but it offers some benefits. "Our chore during the Christmas vacation," remembered Vacaville resident John Vasquez of his childhood, "was to pick brush after they pruned the apricots and all the plum trees. It's cold and wet. The only time you warm up is when you throw your brush on the fire."

Those brush fires warm cold hands, too. Nira Fong Wong of Suisun Valley remembered a few pleasant moments. "It would be so cold sometimes. My oldest sister used to bring potatoes and throw them in the ashes to cook. When they were cooked, we used to eat them and they were nice and warm. We also used to roast marshmallows."

Pruning is an art form in itself and good pruners have always been sought after. Depending on how the wood is trimmed away, the pruner can influence the size of the fruit as well as the amount the tree will produce. Different trees need to be pruned differently; water, soil, and wind all influence how a tree needs to be shaped. A good pruner can visualize in his mind how the tree will look a few years down the road and

how today's cuts will influence the way the tree will grow and produce.

Some trees, such as prunes, do not produce an even-sized crop each year. Rather, they produce a heavy crop one year and a light one the following year. With proper pruning, either result can mean a profit for the farmer, explained Frank Buss. "You prune the tree so, hopefully, there won't be too many of those little prunes when you have a heavy crop. With the lighter crop, you get a lot of nicer-sized ones. The larger prunes you get more money for. The large ones average probably 30 to the pound. The ones after 100 to the pound, you're kind of trading dollars. Anything beyond that, they sometimes go for animal feed."

While many orchards are still pruned by hand, a newer form of pruning has been developed. Here, a machine will cut the tree evenly across the top, giving the orchard a flat-topped appearance. Though decried as "chopping" by many old-timers, there are advantages for some crops such as peaches. Vacaville farmer Richard Nola said, "We brought in a machine to top them. As the tree got larger and larger, the fruit was on the upper side and the pickers wouldn't go after it. We had to bring the tree down and try to force new shoots to come out of the older limbs at a lower level."

Once the pruning is done, disking follows. All the grasses growing between the tree rows are cut and disked under, often with the intent to improve the soil. Yellow mustard especially helps to break down the soil.

Organic farmer Mary Eldredge is convinced that disking in the mulch is the best method. "Mustard was always a winter crop that came up here. It was disked under every year. It's very good because it has a big root that breaks up the soil. When I was growing up, in the wintertime this entire valley was yellow. Then we began irrigating. Mustard seeds sprout whenever you water them. Mustard seeds began sprouting and before they grew up and went to seed, the farmer would disk. Eventually, mustard disappeared, except for little stands of it. When I read about its soil improvement capabilities, I bought 100 pounds of mustard and 100 pounds of wild rash, which is a relative, and I seeded it out there."

Frank Buss also believes in disking the grasses under. He pointed out that timing is critical. "When we cultivate, we do it from the seat of a tractor. To cultivate, you use a disk with 24-inch blades on it and it plows right under. The idea is to try to get to it while the cover crop is green, when the wild oats are in the milk. You squeeze them and the milk will come out on your fingers. We had a lot of yellow mustard, and that helps. Burr clover is very good, but you always try to be sure you had the seeds in those burrs when you cultivated so it comes back every year."

Farming in the hills, as Arlene Samuels and her husband did, offers its own set of

challenges when working with machinery. "On the hillside disking, you want to make sure the first time over that you go sideways. If you go up and down early and it rains, then you have the water going down. We do the disking sideways first and then come back the other way. We usually have a board that pulls along behind, which smoothes it over. We don't roll anymore.

"They're some things, quite honestly, that I have to do differently since my husband died, because of time and ability, and I don't like tractors anymore. My reaction time isn't what it was. When you go over a rock, one end of the tractor is up and one end is down. It's a little interesting. You get a little used to it, but never quite comfortable with it."

After pruning and disking are done, other chores wait. But that is another story.

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