

## FRIENDLY GIANT OR OGRE?

*By Carol Ponchet-Cassidy*

King, Gravenstein, Bramley's Seedling and Belle de Boskoop are but a few of the varietal "giants" of the apple tree world. They share the same common trait of being trees that grow large and fast.

All vigorous apple varieties are best grown as free-standing trees. They simply have too much vigor to grow successfully and productively in a restrained fashion such as espalier. Their mature size can be anywhere from 20 to 30 feet high as well as wide.

These vigorous giants can seem daunting at pruning time. They can be veritable ogres! Some common concerns may be: Can you rejuvenate a mature tree? What can you do about all that height and width? Where do you start when the branches are so dense? Why isn't there much fruit? Lastly, what can you do about those prolific "water sprouts" that pop up all over?

There is a common saying regarding pruning. "The more you cut, the more it grows". Bearing this in mind, how do you resolve the concerns listed above, while only removing a minimum amount of growth?

A "responsive" style of pruning is extremely beneficial and productive for these apple trees. Responsive pruning is, simply put, yielding to the strength of the tree. In other words, go easy and leave it longer rather than shorter. Your goal is to make sure that there is good air flow between the branches, and that the sunlight can penetrate the tree when it is in leaf. A responsive style of pruning results in progressively calmer and calmer growth each year. Your task of annual pruning becomes easier as each winter passes.

It's always a good idea to start with the three D's of pruning that many of you have heard before. Remove all diseased, damaged and dead wood. A neglected tree will especially benefit from this. If you're not sure a branch is dead or diseased, do a simple "scratch test" with your pruners or thumb nail. Scrap at or make a little slice into the bark. If the layer between the bark and the wood is brown and not light green, then the cambium, the "reproductive layer" is dead, and the branch should be removed.

Once you have removed all the three D wood, what you're left with is a tree that is quite open and spread out in appearance. The branches are probably long and reaching. There may or may not be many side branches, and there are probably lots of water sprouts.

It makes sense to begin by climbing into the center of the mature tree and starting there since you will be pulling branches down through the tree and likely breaking some existing branches and twigs. Generally, it's wise to remove all the water sprouts on the inside half of the tree. You may also need to "thin out" some branches. Imagine the branches radiating out from the center of the tree. Any branches that counter this pattern should be removed. As well, any branches growing straight up or straight down should also be removed.

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Once this is done, look at the spacing between the branches. A healthy, productive tree should have at least one to two feet of open space around each branch. I heard a charming analogy from a friend one day. She said "...a robin should be able to fly through the tree in winter". If you find some branches that you want to remove completely, it's sometimes easier to cut it out in pieces. Your final cut should be smooth and close to the branch "collar".

The collar is the narrow swelling that circles the base of the branch. It contains a high concentration of regenerative tissue. If the branch is removed properly so that the cut is flush with the outside of the collar, then the regenerative tissue it contains will grow out and envelope your cut. Don't remove the collar completely. If you do it will result in a cut that is flush and smooth with the trunk or major limb, and there will be no regenerative tissue to grow over the wound which can, down the road, invite disease.

If you have some water sprouts on the outer half of the tree, remove any that are vigorously growing straight up. Then remove any that are straight down or heading back towards the center of the tree. Any sprouts that are left can be thinned slightly if they're crowded. These water sprouts, by the way, are simply one year old wood. They have the potential, like any other young branch on the tree, to become fruitful. As long as the angle isn't too vertical, they should produce fruit buds during the upcoming growing season, and bear fruit the following year.

Now, you're near the end of your task. You still have those long reaching branches. Some are more vertical and others may arch out and wide. If you need or want to shorten any of these, cut them back by no more than one third, and make sure you cut back to a side branch that is no less than half the girth of the main branch. Take a moment and be proud of yourself now. A neglected tree can be labour intensive to prune. A fully mature or heritage tree can take a professional up to four hours to prune.

Fortunately homeowners can pick away at the task at their leisure. They have at least three months to do the job. Pruning apple trees can be done anytime from late November to the end of February for coastal regions and early November to late March for interior and prairie climates.

It may seem impossible to turn an ogre into a friendly giant, but by being responsive to the vigor of the tree, and yielding slightly to its strength and size, a harmonious balance can be achieved. Each successive year of pruning will be easier, and the trees health and productivity will be greatly enhanced.

***\*\*Before and after pictures are on the next page\*\****



BEFORE



AFTER

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