

TAKING THE PUZZLE OUT OF PEACHES

By Carol Ponchet-Cassidy

We've all seen or had a peach tree that rambles out of reach with bare, old brittle limbs, or a young tree with lots of foliage and hardly any fruit. Problems like these are usually a result of either not enough pruning or shoot thinning.

Approaching a peach tree at pruning time can be a little puzzling but with diligence you can have a healthy, productive and manageable tree.

Peaches bear the bulk of their fruit on 2 and 3 year old wood. We need to prune and maintain the tree so that each year we encourage lots of new growth. Well-rotted (old and cold) manure spread around the tree every fall or spring will help provide the extra nitrogen the tree needs to produce lots of new growth.

The pruning rule "*the more you cut, the more it grows*" is especially applicable to peaches. Up to 50% can be removed each year. The bulk of the pruning can be done either in the fall or winter.

When pruning, the goal is to maintain a productive tree with a practical and aesthetic shape. Always start with the 3 D's. Remove all dead, diseased or damaged wood. Next, remove any branches (including wood that grew this year) that are growing in an undesirable direction, are crossing, or are rubbing. Then, you can cut all the remaining new growth back by half.

The tree will look a little sparse, but that's fine. With the hard prune and the manure mulch, lots of new wood will grow. When you see the new growth developing in the spring, feel free to remove any of the young shoots or branchlets that are too crowded. Good spacing is beneficial for air circulation and sunlight penetration.

Fruitful buds come in clusters on peach trees. After the tree has bloomed and leafed out, you'll see little peaches forming. Wait for the "*natural drop*" of some of these little peaches to occur sometime in June. Then thin out the fruit leaving one peach every 5 – 6 inches.

When summer arrives and the peaches are growing, you can help direct more of the tree's energy to the fruit by doing some "*summer pruning*". Beyond the last fruit on a branch, count 3 – 4 leaves, and remove the rest of the branch. Do this to the entire tree. While the fruit continues to develop, the current season's growth you've left on the tree is setting its fruit buds for next year.

Repeating this pruning and maintenance process every year will help to keep your peach tree healthy, fruitful and beautiful!

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304 Walton Place, Victoria, B.C. (t)250-658-5888 (f)250-658-0545
farms@lecoteau.com ~ www.lecoteau.com