

Fall pruning of trees and vines

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After harvest a common question posed is whether it is OK to start pruning. Many growers want to start this labor-intensive process while seasonal labor is still available. With some species, pruning while there is low probability of rain can reduce infections of certain canker diseases. If you have clay or clay-loams soils, which are common in the Planada, Le Grand, Gustine and Los Banos areas, finishing this operation before winter rains can reduce tracking and ruts in the field that have to be smoothed out in the spring. It is much easier to transport the prunings out of the orchards when the soil is still dry.

Almonds can be pruned right after harvest. If the trees are water-stressed, they should first be irrigated to protect next year's fruit buds. Cooperative Extension research has shown that there are no known harmful effects to the trees if they are pruned while the leaves are still on. Almonds can be infected by a disease called silver leaf. The fungus that causes the disease infects freshly cut surfaces. The fungus produces a toxin that is transported in the xylem vessels which carry water and minerals from the roots to the leaves. The leaves of infected trees will have a silvery appearance – thus its name. Pruning young trees just before bloom and old trees soon after harvest can reduce the chance of infection.

Peaches on the other hand, require much detailed hand pruning of the fruiting shoots which we call hangars and seldom need large chainsaw cuts that are common in almonds. In order to make these fine cuts, the leaves need to be off for visibility. Silver leaf has not been a problem in peaches. Mature peaches are typically pruned in December and January. First, second and third leaf peaches on sandy soils are usually pruned just before bloom because this sometimes reduces the amount of bacterial canker disease. Bacterial canker is a bacterial disease that is not associated with pruning wounds. After years of research, we still do not understand its mechanism of infection.

Apricots are often pruned in late summer to avoid infections of the pruning wounds by a fungus disease called Eutypa. Infection occurs when it rains soon after pruning. If you cannot prune in late summer then it is advisable to wait till just before bloom next spring.

Grapes are also susceptible to Eutypa. As the winter progresses, the number of Eutypa spores in the air declines so the infection potential is at a minimum in early spring. Grapes must also have the leaves off to be able to select good fruiting canes in the case of Thompson seedless variety or good fruiting spurs in the case of wine and table grape varieties. For these reasons, pruning is delayed until early spring when the risk of infection declines. Delaying the pruning of grapes into late spring will also delay bud break a little, reducing the risk of frost damage to young shoots. Pruning should be completed before the initiation of shoot growth in the spring.

Dried plums can be pruned almost any time. If hand pruning is used then the grower will wait till after the leaves are off. Figs growers typically wait till all the leaves are off and the tree is fully dormant.