



Restore those old fruit trees.

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You have been looking at that very large, old, unkept fruit tree in your yard for some time now wondering what you are going to do with it. You are faced with a difficult decision. Do I save this old tree and try to bring the vigor back to it or do I remove it and start over with a new tree. Let me help you analyze the situation so you can make a more informed decision. Ask yourself these few questions.

- Is the trunk of the tree sound with no major holes or a rotted center?
- Does the tree appear to be healthy with minimal limb dieback or signs of disease?
- Does the tree produce a desirable variety of fruit, one that I will use?
- Will I be able to care for this large tree properly? Spraying and picking will probably need to be done from a ladder.
- Is the tree in a location that fits into my garden plan?
- Will I be more likely to keep a small tree in good shape or the large old one? Abandoned trees harbor insects and diseases that can damage other orchards.

If you decide to save your old fruit tree you will have to start a program of renovation that will usually take three to four crop years. You will need to identify what type of fruit tree you have. If you moved into your home during the dormant season and you are not sure bring a twig or small branch to your nearest Master Gardener Clinic for help. A good renovation program begins with pruning. Knowing what type of fruit tree you have is critical since each type of fruit tree requires a little different pruning system. (See Training and Pruning your home orchard. PNW 400). It is best to wait until your tree has dropped all its leaves and is dormant before doing major corrective pruning.

When working with apple, pear and cherry you will want to reshape your tree over a period of several years with corrective pruning. During the first year reduce the height of the tree. If your tree is over twenty feet tall it is acceptable to shorten it by six to eight feet with the first pruning. Shorten the tree by cutting the main scaffold limbs back to a strong well positioned side shoot or riser. Thin out the upper third of the tree by removing dead branches, crossing limbs and hanging branches. This will allow better light and air movement into the tree in the coming year.

In the second year during the summer inspect your pruning and remove most large vigorous new shoots that have arisen at the top of the tree. Just leave a few minor shoots that do not shade much. If you see new shoots developing lower down in the tree especially off of the main trunk or scaffolds leave them alone. We are trying to get the tree to start producing new fruit wood in the lower canopy. During the second dormant pruning period you should decide on the desired final height for the tree. You probably won't be able to lower the tree more than another two feet from the previous year without hurting your tree and yield potential. Continue to thin out shoots in the upper half of the tree trying to space the main limbs and distribute the new fruiting wood uniformly. Limbs around the outside of the tree should be shortened to allow better light exposure to the lowest new limbs. Help train new shoots off the trunk to go outward not straight up.

During the third year in the summer return to the top of your tree and remove about half of the new shoots that have once again arisen near your heaviest pruning cuts. Remove the most vigorous shoots first. When the third dormant period comes continue to shape your tree by shortening the outer branches by a foot or two. Spread the new fruiting wood evenly over the entire tree from the lowest limbs to the upper scaffolds. Your tree should now allow very good light and air penetration to all the limbs. All areas of your tree should now be easily accessible from your ladder for thinning, spraying and picking.

From the first year of your renovation project your tree's recovery will be enhanced by clearing away any tall grass or brush from around the trunk of the tree out to the dripline. You should also check the PH of your garden or yard soil near your old tree to see how acidic your soil has become. Home owners can buy an inexpensive soil test kit at any garden supply store. If your soil has become very acidic with a PH below 5.6 you will help the nutrient uptake of your old tree by liming. Mulching under your old tree out to the drip line with aged manure or compost will also help return health to your soil and vigor to your tree. You will also want to start a regular spray program with dormant oils and fungicides every dormant season to keep your tree in top shape.

One big advantage to restoring your old fruit tree over taking it out and replanting is that you will be able to pick some fruit during the renovation process. By the fourth year your large tree will also be producing three to four times what a small tree would.

References:

Pruning to restore an old, neglected apple tree. R.L. Stebbins and J. Olsen. EC 1005
Training and Pruning your home orchard. R.L. Stebbins. PNW 400
Apple Nutrient Management Guide. EM 8712