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LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT & ARBORIST

CARE OF FRUIT TREES IN SO. CAL.

A. Before you plant, consider:

1. Why do you want to have fruit trees? What is the most important aspect to you?
2. Single tree, few trees, or orchard, in mulch or lawn? Total space available?
3. Site environmental conditions: Is terrain level, sloping, geologically stable? Soil: texture, structure, organic material, compaction, micro flora and fauna? Test soil sample. Sun orientation, climate, microclimate, wind, shade; available water, quality?
4. Orchard layout: Dwarf trees, high density planting, hedges, espaliers?
5. Irrigation system: Complexity, water quality and quantity needed?
6. Tree selection at nursery: Size: full, semidwarf, dwarf? Kind, genus, species, variety? Grafted? What rootstock? Deciduous or evergreen? Appropriate for local climate? Winter chill hours? (See the 'Low Chill Fruit Trees for So. Cal.' handout.) Cross pollination required? Tree available canned or bare root? Size? Not overgrown, rootbound? Good structure, no double trunks? Healthy? Tapered and feathered trunk?
7. Maintenance required? By whom? How tall will you keep your trees, need to climb ladder? Preventive maintenance is least expensive; well cared for trees will last longer, be healthier.

B. Before you prune, know the general reasons to prune:

1. Keep the tree healthy. Remove dead, diseased, damaged, rubbing, crisscrossing or misplaced wood (water sprouts, co-dominant trunks, V-crotches, inward growing or competing branches) in a way that promotes fast woundwood formation.
2. Develop strong structure, desirable characteristics: early primary and secondary, strong branched scaffold or framework, within the selected shape: round head or vase shape (decurrent); central leader (excurrent), espalier; cordon.
3. Develop tapered trunk and counteract the natural tendency of the tree to grow top heavy, by keeping the bottom half bigger than the top.
4. Stimulate growth in desired direction. Control size. Provide clearance. Emphasize branch horizontal/lateral growth for fruit production. Shape; show character. Reduce shade.
5. Increase flower/fruit production, vigor.

C. Then apply specific pruning considerations:

1. Season. Different seasons have different pruning effect.
2. Flowering/fruiting habit of tree: location, age, current year or long lived spurs?
3. Shaping of young tree or vine vs. mature plant maintenance pruning. Desired shape, height?
4. Branch scaffold requirements. Space between scaffold branches. Single trunk.
5. Useful pruning techniques. Heading, thinning, tying or bending, weighting branches.
6. Poor pruning to be avoided: top tree, leave 'V'-crotches, remove trunk 'feathers', make large pruning cuts >4", make branch flush cuts, remove >25% of leaves, open trunk to sunburn.
7. A good tree trimmer can explain the reason for every single cut, accurately predict the result.
8. Young trees need more pruning than mature ones. Pruning costs are low initially, then go up with age. After developing desired framework and structure, future pruning is much easier.

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CA LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT 1970 CERTIFIED ARBORIST ISA-WE-3271-A

PLANTING & MAINTENANCE

1. Plant small in fall: smaller size fruit trees, planted in late fall-early spring, succeed better.
2. Planting: dig hole twice as wide, no deeper than rootball; roughen sides. Using sharp knife, make 4 vertical top-bottom slits, 1/2" deep, in sides and bottom of rootball to prevent girdling roots. Plant tree slightly high (.5-1"), do not bury root flare. Apply soil conditioner, organic fertilizer as needed, backfill hole. Put 3-4" thick layer of mulch on soil, but keep 6" away from trunk. Remove nursery stake and locate 1-2 new stake(s) outside the rootball. Loosely tie the tree to stake(s) with soft flexible tree ties. Remove stake(s) after one or two years, once the tree can support itself.
3. After planting, and staking, check to see that after initial settling, the tree is still planted slightly higher than surrounding area, with root flare or top of first main root visible.
4. Construct watering berm around the planting hole to help retain water. Water deeply right after planting; water as if the tree is still in container during first few months.
5. Mulch 3 – 4" deep with (composted) mulch (shredded bark or woodchips; leaves are good but get easily blown away in the wind). Keep mulch 6" away from the trunk; keeping the root flare exposed to the sun prevents fungus from attacking trunk. Refresh the mulch every year; it breaks down and gets incorporated in the soil. Bare soil and decomposed granite (D.G.) are not good for trees, while lawn roots compete.
6. For drip irrigation, expand the system as the tree grows. Water long enough to wet the soil to 6-12" deep. For both spray and drip irrigation, keep water away from the trunk itself. Know that most spray irrigation applies water faster than soil can absorb.
7. If no drip or spray irrigation is used, water manually: a) During the first year once-twice a week during warm dry weather. Water weekly in winter if there is not sufficient rain. Keep the soil moist but not soaking wet. Try to get the soil wet to 6 – 12" deep; b) During the second year deep water once a week from late spring through early fall; c) After two years the tree should be self supporting. Water monthly and deeply only during drought.
8. Keep all plants, including grass and weeds min. 12" away from the tree. Competition is hard on young trees, and moisture from too close plants may stimulate fungus.
9. Fertilize only as needed. Up to half of agricultural nitrogen fertilizer applied is wasted, harms the environment. Most soils in Southern California are low in nitrogen, not so much in other nutrients. Initially test the soil to know exactly what's needed. Fertilize in modest amounts: many fertilizer recommendations are based on short term agricultural crops requiring higher doses, not on lower needs trees. Plants in containers need fertilizer more often, in small doses. Use slow acting organic fertilizer and plant some legumes whenever possible. Consider that almost all tree roots live in close association with billions of microorganisms, including mycorrhizae (beneficial fungi) that don't function well with high doses of fertilizer. See my handout: 'A Silent Jungle: The Soil Underfoot'.
10. Prune as per preceding page. Remember: 95 % of good tree care is preventive maintenance.

For more information see the California Backyard Orchard Series from UC Davis, the Dave Wilson Nursery Backyard Orchard Series, the Guideline Specifications for Nursery Tree Quality, California Rare Fruit Growers Association publications, all online, and the Sunset Western Garden Book.