

Pruning Peaches & Nectarines

Growing peach (*Prunus persica*) and nectarine (*P. persica*) trees in the landscape or backyard orchard in South Carolina can be both fun and rewarding. However, the success of your peach-growing enterprise will depend largely on the care and attention the trees are given throughout their lifetimes. Pruning and training are an essential part of that care.

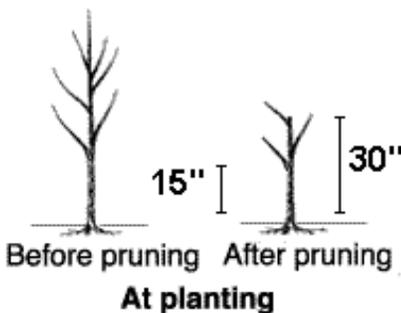
Note: For simplicity, the term "peach" used in this fact sheet refers to both peaches and nectarines, since they are grown in the same way.

Peaches are usually trained to an open-center system and should eventually be shaped like the tree shown below in aerial and side views.



Initial Pruning & Training

Cut back newly planted trees to about 30 inches high, just above a lateral branch or bud. If the tree is branched when it comes from the nursery, select

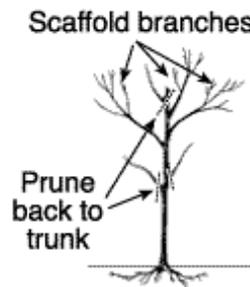


three or four laterals with wide-angle crotches (greater than 45°) spaced evenly up and around the trunk for the permanent scaffold limbs.

The lowest limb should be about 15 inches and the highest about 30 inches from the ground. If no desirable laterals are available, head the tree to the

desired height and cut out all side branches to one bud.

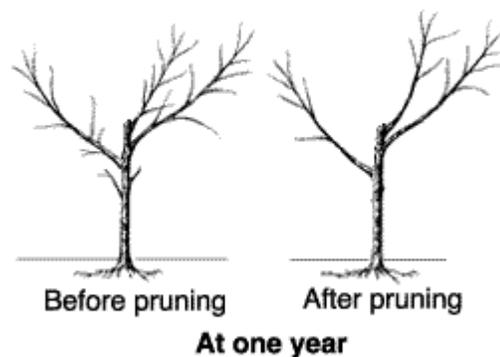
A number of shoots will develop during the season that can be selected for scaffold limbs. Select scaffold limbs during the summer or wait until just before growth begins in the second season.



First summer (June)

First Growing Season

At the end of the first growing season, the tree should look similar to the "before pruning" example below. Prune in mid-February to early March.



First, remove diseased, broken and low-hanging limbs. Next, remove vigorous upright shoots that may have developed on the inside of the main scaffolds to develop an open-center (vase-shaped) tree. Once the scaffold system of the young peach tree is established, prune as little as possible until the tree becomes mature enough to fruit, usually the third or fourth year. Peaches are produced on wood

that grew during the previous season. Do not prune trees from October to January. In the mountains and Piedmont, wait until mid-February to prune. Pruning in late winter reduces the chance of winter injury and infection by the bacterial canker organism.

Pruning Older Trees

Follow the same principles used after the first growing season. First, remove low-hanging, broken, and/or diseased limbs. To maintain the open center, remove any vigorous upright shoots developing on the inside of the tree, leaving the smaller shoots for fruit production. Prune out poor-quality fruiting wood, such as shoots less than pencil-size in diameter or branches that hang downward and are shaded. The desirable wood left for production should be about the diameter of a pencil and from 12 to 18 inches in length. If the length exceeds 24 inches, cut off about one-third of this fruiting branch. Finally, prune the vigorous upright limbs on the scaffolds by cutting them back to an outside-growing shoot.

The same principles used to develop the tree are used annually to maintain the size and shape of the mature peach tree. Remove low-hanging, broken, and dead limbs first. Next, remove the vigorous upright shoots along the scaffolds. Lower the tree to the desired height by pruning the scaffolds down to an outside-growing shoot at the desired height.

Prune out extremely vigorous shoots developing on the inside of the tree because they shade out the center. Leave the small shoots alone. Do this in early or mid-July. Never prune a bearing peach tree heavily enough to make eventual thinning of the fruit unnecessary. Such heavy pruning drastically reduces the crop as well as the size of the tree.

Lightly head back terminal growth on the scaffold limbs to outward-growing laterals to maintain the open center or bowl-shaped tree. The objective is to open up the tree to allow sunlight penetration and air movement and to improve spray coverage. When the tree is well-grown, pruning consists mainly of moderate thinning and heading cuts back to outward-growing laterals to keep the tree low and spreading. A height of 8 to 9 feet is preferred.

Thinning Fruit

A peach tree cultivated under favorable conditions will set more fruit than it is capable of successfully carrying to maturity. Branches may break and the fruits typically have poor color and taste. To prevent limb breakage and ensure good fruit quality, excess fruits must be removed or thinned. Hand-thin the tree about four weeks after full bloom, spacing the peaches about 6 inches apart on the limb. When thinning by hand, grasp the stem or branch firmly between the thumb and forefinger and pull the fruit off with a quick motion of the second and third fingers.

Excerpted from the *South Carolina Master Gardener Training Manual*, EC 678.

Prepared by Bob Polomski, Extension Consumer Horticulturist & Greg Reighard, Extension Specialist, Clemson University. (New 01/00.)

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