



Ecosystem Insights

Pruning: A Preamble

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Everyone loves to prune. And at the beginning of each new year, we're all chomping at the bit, itching to get started. The lead-in to this year's pruning season has provided drama we haven't seen since 2012. December was warm and trees didn't get close to fulfilling their chilling requirements until late in the month. Pruning too early can lead to really bad results under the wrong circumstances. That's why monitoring weather/tree physiology and timing the start of pruning are so important.

Pruning as everyone knows is both a dwarfing (for the trees, not you) and invigorating (for all organisms involved) activity. You prune to get rid of last year's unwanted growth, dead or disease limbs, open up the tree and restructure the canopy for better light and air penetration. But everything you remove sets the tree up to respond with an equal amount of regrowth in the spring. Equal and opposite reactions, anyone? Well, not exactly. You see the biggest regulator of growth response is next year's crop, the one you don't know about yet. That's why predicting the unknown is a critical skill.

Return bloom is always a tricky thing to manage. And with such a heavy crop and crop load management (thinning) being so difficult for organic, biodynamic and holistic growers, we could have the potential for a reduced crop, greater than expected regrowth and not even know it. Couple that with exposure for cold damage to fruit buds with the warmer than normal weather we've been having and we could be looking at everything going in the wrong direction (not that I am being paranoid, just prudent). That's why I like to wait. This way you can better assess the return bloom, crop load potential, and get past the coldest part of the winter. Of course, you can't wait forever; but, the riskier scenarios you can put behind you, the better.

Developing a pruning strategy should start by making a series of guesses about what return bloom will be like (Q1: how big was my crop last year? What do the buds look like on the tree?); what if any cold damage past, present or future the trees may have experienced (Q2: how cold has it been, is it, or will it be?); a consideration of the cold hardiness of your particular varieties, rootstocks and locations; factor in the potential for spring frost using your site history (Q3: do you have early or late blooming varieties? Is this a "frosty" site?); and, finally, is your orchard on a strong site - in other words, (Q4: do the trees naturally grow more vigorously there than on another site?) Once you answer those questions, you have what you need to develop a sound pruning strategy.

If the unforeseen occurs, there are always ways to adjust for unfortunate circumstances - but we'll get into those if and when the time comes. For now, start as late as possible and make sure you leave enough time to get your pruning done by tight cluster. If you can wait, then wait. If you need something else to do, there's always ice fishing. Oh wait, there's not much ice. Never mind.

Next Issue — Back to Basics: Pruning 101

Ecosystem Insights: Advice and Opinions for Organic, Biodynamic, & Holistic Orchardists

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