

## **Apples and Soft Fruit: Summer Pruning**

### **Why wielding your secateurs now should all but ensure a healthy crop of fruit in 12 months' time**

Most fruit trees and bushes, top fruit, like apples, and soft fruit, like gooseberries, fit snugly into a small, sunny spot in the garden, whatever its size. They look attractive and provide a welcome harvest, all for very little work: 'grow your own fruit' is much less time-consuming than 'grow your own veg'. In a confined space, it's best to train the fruit into an attractive shape, and this is the ideal time to prune and thereby keep the plants looking neat.

Apples are grafted on to rootstocks that will keep the trees small. M9, for example will ensure a tree won't get any taller than 1.2 metres, and M26 and M29, though a little more vigorous, are ideal for making a small tree. Then there are so many shapes you can use for training. A single or double 'cordon' stem[s]; a 'fan' shape; an 'espalier'; or a 3 pronged inverted fork. Cordon apples are grown diagonally at 45° to the ground and can be as little as 45cm apart, letting you grow several varieties in a tiny space. In a similar patch, you'd have to content yourself with one espalier or fan.

These trees need to be pruned in the summer for 3 reasons: you'll get more light and air for the ripening fruit; you encourage next year's fruit buds to form and ripen; and you maintain the shape you want while avoiding a straggly mess.

I have a row of apples trained along 3 horizontal wires. The fruits have, of course, been thinned by removing all but one apple per spur, but sappy shoots are sprouting everywhere, along the horizontal stems and from the vertical ones. Next year's fruiting buds form at the base of these shoots, so the tree should be encouraged to develop these buds, rather than putting its energy into unnecessary and unsightly new shoots. The main horizontals also need to be trimmed back.

Use clean, sharp secateurs to snip the shoots back to 2 or 3 leaves. If there's more sappy growth later on, leave cutting that out till a late winter prune. One way of preventing this secondary growth is to leave 2 or 3 shoots alone: the tree will put some of its energy into developing them, and it's then easy to cut back later in the winter.

By the autumn, next year's buds will have formed and ripened, all ready for the spring. A meagre crop often results from buds poorly ripened in the previous summer, not from frost damage in the Spring. It's also important to limit the size of the harvest by thinning as this will avoid the cycle of a poor year's crop following a bumper one.

Soft fruit can also be trained this way. I grow gooseberries along horizontal wires and get hardly any scratches when picking! With soft fruit, the bushes are pruned after the harvest, along much the same lines as for top fruit. The new growth is cut back to a couple of leaves, and all the shoots heading in the 'wrong' direction are removed. The bush will throw up a forest of new shoots from base and most, if not all, will be for the chop. After a few years, the older main stems will need to be replaced by new ones growing in roughly the same direction. Limit this change to no more than 1 stem per year.

Gooseberries look great when grown this way, as do currants and hybrid fruits like Jostaberries or Worcesterberries. The pruning methods vary according to the species, but the principle of pruning after fruiting applies to all the soft fruit. Red and white currants fruit on 2 year old wood, so the older wood should be progressively removed and only a small proportion of fresh wood retained. Blackcurrants fruit next year on this year's new growth which comes from the crown or from mature stems. You get the best yield by cutting out ⅓ of the mature stems every year, replacing them with

new ones. This way, you'll have a better crop than you'd get from cutting out all this year's fruiting stems and replacing with new ones.

We planted a 'fruit hedge' in our demonstration garden, growing lots of different varieties along an ordinary old metre high post and wire fence – what a succulent, mouth-watering sight that made! It was fun designing the fence to illustrate the different training methods. A fan-shaped red currant made a central feature. It was planted next to a pair of cordon-trained gooseberries arranged to make a pyramid outline. Black and white currants made the same pattern as the gooseberries on the other side of the redcurrant.

Unless you want to share the fruit with your neighbours or passers-by on the street, you'll not want to use this as a boundary hedge, but why not divide the garden into 'rooms'? A Victorian walled kitchen garden might have boasted an impressive Pear Walk, but even a small garden could accommodate a Currant or Gooseberry Walk, not to mention an Apple one.

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