

PLUMS – PLANTING, GROWING AND PRUNING

They're one of the most popular summer fruits, but how do you keep the birds off your plum crop?

Who should be surprised that plums are the second most cultivated fruit in the world and that even Confucius couldn't resist enthusing about them? Luckily, they grow very well here in Scotland and there must be lots of us who wouldn't be without a plum tree. For me, the plum season starts with a sweet, succulent, sun-baked Early Transparent Gage and culminates in the bitter/sweet, soft textured Victoria. A plant worth taking some trouble over!

Like most apples, plums are grafted onto rootstocks that will control their vigour, which is just as well for folk with small gardens. Even though I have plenty space for tall trees, I've had far too many heart-stopping wobbles when up a lurching ladder, so do insist on picking fruit with both feet firmly on the ground. The ideal choice for a comfortably small tree is your chosen variety grafted on 'Pixie' rootstock. 'St Julien A' will give you a medium sized tree and 'Brompton' or 'Mryrobalan B' large ones.

New trees should be planted during the winter and, if you train one as a small bush or in a fan, it will be easier to protect it from bird damage. Our avian friends are the first to enjoy the plum harvest and up in the orchard, I've seen the resident birds get more fruit than us; so my latest plum, 'Jubilee', is fan trained and safely ensconced in the fruitcage next to the strawberries, rasps and Tayberry.

An alternative technique, after planting against a wall, is to fix a frame so you can drape a net over the tree when necessary - there's no doubt that fan training is the best way of foiling birds. Another approach is to prune a young tree into the shape of a 'pyramid', to let in lots of light to reach all those sweetly ripening fruits. A Pyramid will usually grow to around 8', so you'll have the option of protecting it with a net. This is a wee bit higher than I'd like, but most of the fruit is still within stretching reach.

If you've inherited a large, established plum, there is frankly not a lot you can do to stop the birds, other than hope the crop is big enough that you'll at least get a share. What drives me mad is the way blue tits will peck at so many plums just before we'd consider testing whether they're ripe enough. And while on moans, the all too common cracked skin - a magnet to every fly in the orchard - is unavoidable as it's caused by rain falling on dry fruit, so the only course of action we have is to rail against the elements.

The second, and greatest, threat to plums is silver leaf disease, *Chondrostereum purpureum*. This fungal disease is most active during cool, wet winters, so we need to get the secateurs out during the spring and summer.

Between September and May, the fungal spores enter the tree where any branches have been pruned. The fungus exudes toxins which travel to the leaves, make their tissues separate and air enter the gap between the tissues, so making the leaves look 'silvery'. But the real damage is done to the branches which will start to die back in late summer and this leads to the small, hard and shrivelled plums you're only too happy to share with the blue tits.

If you catch the disease at the beginning, the answer is to cut affected branches back to a clean join but if the disease has spread all over the tree or it appears on any suckers, the whole tree will need to be grubbed up. Fortunately, though, the Parliamentary 'Silver Leaf Order' of 1923 was revoked in 1965. This had required that all dead wood was to be burned on the premises

by 15th July in any year and if the trunk or roots were affected the whole lot had to be removed and burned. No messing about here.

So, it's best to do whatever pruning is needed from early summer onwards, and I like to start after blossom time when the sap is rising vigorously. With this timing, of course, you get the added bonus of the spectacular blossom and the tree then puts its energy into the branches you're going to keep.

In the early years, plums are pruned in the normal way to produce bush, pyramid or fan shapes and don't be afraid of sticking to the shape you want. A young enthusiastic practitioner of 'Gard'nery', John Reid, told us just what to do. He plied his trade in 3 gardens, in Hamilton, Drummond and Forden and shares his advice in 'The Scots Gardener' [1683]: "that you may better understand what to cut, you may stand under, go about, look up through the tree where you may espy superfluities...mind always to prun such as cross, Rubs and gall others and any branches that grow not the way you should want them."

Reid gives us 'carte blanche' to do what we will with our large, established and unruly plum trees. If you want to bring one under some control, pruning should be phased in over 3 or 4 years – you do want to avoid having more new cuts at one time than is necessary, as it would give the poor thing a bit of a shock if you pruned the lot at one go.

Good shape, with no vertical branches, as open a centre as possible and no crossing or crowded twigs is what we're looking for and any damaged or unhealthy limbs will certainly be for the chop. My Victoria up in the orchard does need this treatment, so I'll be starting on the two or three most offending branches this year. This will entail sawing off a doomed branch at the trunk and working up it, cutting in sections to gently ease each piece out to avoid losing any of the precious fruit beginning to form on other branches. Then, some time in the winter when I'm up there pruning the apples, I'll have a wee look at the leafless plum as Reid suggests, and mark next year's candidates with a piece of string – the shape shows up so much better without the leaves.

When, in time, the tree is brought under control, it will grow better, be less prone to canker and will produce better fruit. But for the best crop, regardless of how the plum is trained, we must harden our hearts and thin out the fruit. Some will drop naturally in the early summer, but if there's going to be a cracking crop, you do get the best results when you thin the fruit out to about 5 – 10cm apart. The fruit will be much larger – I can't stand it when the stone's the largest bit of the plum and thinning also helps next year's crop because the tree will have enough energy to produce good fruiting buds for next year.

Enough to make the mouth water