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DORMANT FRUIT TREE PRUNING

Apple, pear, sour cherry, sweet cherry and European plum trees are all pruned by the modified central leader method. The goal is to train the tree to be shaped like a Christmas tree. The lower limbs should be longer than those directly above them. This is accomplished by keeping one stem (leader) in the center of the tree and all other side branches (scaffolds) originate from that central leader.

If the trees you received have already been pruned to the proper shape, the first year's concern should be the supply of ample water and proper fertilizer (water soluble). If your tree has not been pruned, begin by choosing a central leader or one that is dominant over all others (straighter, taller, thicker). Any limbs competing with this one should be removed. The central leader should then be reduced by approximately 25% of its length.

Next, measure 15" from the bottom of the tree. Remove all side branches below the 15 inch level on the newly planted tree. Choose scaffold limbs that balance the tree. The scaffolds should be approximately 12 inches apart up the tree and arranged symmetrically around the tree or arranged in a star shaped fashion (if looking down on the tree from above). Thin out those that are in the wrong position or broken. Save those with wide angle crotches as they are a stronger limb. Reduce the chosen branches by about 25%.

The next year, you should have lots of side branches (scaffolds) to select in order to make up your finished tree. In the first three to five years, you will need to choose 10-12 scaffold branches. These should be chosen so they are approximately 12 inches apart and so they have that star shaped arrangement around the tree. Do not head the branches back (reduce their length) that are growing strongly. You will have to head back any that tend to be weak. Cut off about 25% of each of these weaker shoots. Then make a cut on the central leader 12-15 inches above the top scaffold. Next, remove any branches you do not need. (For instance, branches that are too close together or are directly over one another can be as close as 6 inches apart on the leader. DO NOT remove the short, weak growing shoots that grow on the leader in between the scaffold branches. These will set fruit buds and fruit.

As your tree gets older, the top branches will become more dominant. However – we do not want the top branches to outgrow the bottom, so when a top branch appears overly large in relation to the bottom, remove it with a thinning cut, leaving a weaker growing branch to take its place. Substituting weak branches for strong branches in the top 1/3 of the tree will be an annual task for the life of the tree. Limit the height of the tree by removing the most vigorous of the upright shoots on the central leader and leaving the weakest upright shoot and then heading it back to two buds.