

Rejuvenate your old apple tree

Many apple trees in North Dakota grow in backyards. The trees are tall, rarely pruned, and never sprayed. The trees provide us with some nice flowers in spring, some shade in summer, and a few nice fruits in the fall. It's nice—but we can do better.

If you prune the tree, you could have a healthier tree with more blossoms in spring and better quality fruits in fall.

To get better quality apples, we need to get more sunlight in the canopy. We also need to bring the tree down to size, so we can spray (if needed) and harvest the fruits.

Young apple trees are trained into “Christmas tree” shapes to maximize sunlight in the canopy. In the case of an overgrown tree, it's too late for that type of shaping.

In most cases, we will go for an umbrella shape now, with branches cascading in all directions from the main trunk(s), not allowing the main trunk(s) to get over 10 feet tall—less is better.



The tree has been neglected for years and it will take years to get the tree in decent shape.

This first year, let's focus on reducing the height of the tree. Our ultimate goal is to bring the tree down to 12 feet tall.

The best time to prune is in late winter (March) since the tree is dormant and the wounds will not be exposed to the worst of winter. But anytime the tree is dormant is okay.

The principles of pruning are the same as described earlier. We want to establish a network of sturdy branches, preferably at 60-degree angles from the trunk. Using the face of a clock as our guide, the strongest, most productive branches will be at angles of 2 and 10 o'clock. Vertical branches are not productive.

Search for sturdy branches about three to four inches thick within the old canopy. We want young, strong branches; these branches have *glossy* bark while old branches are *scaly*.

When we identify a strong, young branch, we will trim above it, bringing the tree down to size (see figures on next page).

To avoid sunscald damage and shocking the tree, try not to remove more than 25 per cent of the tree's wood at any one time. It's best to give yourself at least two years to reshape the tree.

Remove the clutter within the tree. Remove suckers at the base, water sprouts (these are vertical branches in the canopy), broken branches, and inward facing branches.

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This mature tree has an extensive root system and it will keep pumping a lot of nutrients and water to the branches. Expect lots of new shoots to appear this year. You need to aggressively trim out the vertical shoots the following spring. Also, take advantage of any new 60-degree branches that emerge and use them as future scaffold branches.

After about four years, you will see a big difference in the health of the tree and fruit production.

But to be honest, you still have an old tree—and the best days of this tree are long gone.

That is why the best long-term solution is the single-cut “chainsaw” method. Remove the old tree. In the place of the overgrown tree, you could plant two apple trees (or perhaps add a cherry or plum), which will be properly trained.

After four years, you will have good yields of superior fruit and the best days of your young, vigorous trees will be ahead of them—not behind them. The trees will be an attractive feature in your landscape, not a curious eyesore.

Some of us feel it is a sin to cut down a tree in a prairie state like North Dakota, but trees are renewable resources. It’s okay if we cut down one tree and plant two. We can chip up the old tree to use as mulch for the new tree. Plus, we will have more home-grown fruits to share with our families. It’s a win-win situation.



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