

NEWS RELEASE
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IMPROVING FRUIT SIZE BY THINNING

BACKYARD HORTICULTURE
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Most gardeners know that if you take some of the flowers off a blooming plant, the flowers that remain tend to be larger. For instance, pinching the side buds from carnations, chrysanthemums and roses tends to make the terminal flowers larger. This process is known as “disbudding.”

The process of “thinning” is also used to increase the size, not of flowers, but of fruit. Very often fruit trees set such heavy crops that the individual fruits do not grow to a satisfactory size. Limbs may break because of the overload of fruit, and the drain on nutrients and stored carbohydrates in the tree may be so great that no flower buds develop for the following year. This may force the tree into an alternate bearing cycle, which means heavy production one year; very light production the following year. Even if your trees are not thrown into an alternate bearing cycle, several consecutive years of overcropping can deplete carbohydrate reserves and seriously weaken the trees.

When you remove young fruit from a limb, the remaining fruits benefit from the reduced competition for mineral nutrients, light, water and plant foods produced by the leaves. By thinning early, you also increase shoot and leaf growth. This results in extra leaves that produce more sugars and other materials necessary for sizing the remaining fruits. Thinning also helps prevent limb breakage caused by heavy crops. Also, if you thin carefully, you can remove mostly small and cull fruits - those with rub damage, hail marks, disease spots and other blemishes.

You actually do a lot of fruit thinning when you prune your trees, since nearly every pruning cut removes some flower buds. In fact, pruning is the only practical way of thinning cherries and nut crops. However, it is still necessary to hand thin stone fruits such as apricots, nectarines, peaches and plums and pome fruits such as apples and Asian pears. Species that rarely need hand thinning are almonds, avocados, bushberries (such as Boysenberries), cherries, citrus, European pears (such as Bartlett), pistachios and persimmons.

How much to thin depends upon the tree species. With peaches and nectarines, it's important to make room on the branches for each fruit to grow to 2-1/2 to 3 inches in diameter. Thin by pulling of 3/4 to 1 inch long fruit in April and May, leaving one fruit every 6 inches. This results in more fruit on the ground than on the tree, but it's important for the production of large, flavorful fruit and to minimize limb breakage.

Thin apricots when the fruit is about 3/4 inch in diameter, leaving one apricot every three inches. Thin plums when the fruit is 3/4 inch long, leaving one plum every four to six inches. Thin apples after the usual May drop; leave one apple every six inches or allow only one apple to remain per spur. Asian pears should be thinned to leave only one fruit per spur.

While it's best to thin early in the season, it is never too late to do some thinning where trees are having difficulty sizing the crop. Removing small fruit from overloaded trees, even shortly before harvest, will pay off in larger average fruit sizes.

Grape varieties such as Thompson seedless may also benefit from fruit thinning. Removing entire clusters after the berries have set helps to enlarge the berries on the remaining clusters. Remove undersized or misshapen clusters first.