

# Overcoming a phobia of pruning

A master class from the Garden Guru



Bob Osborne teaching people how to prune apple trees at the Riverside Consolidated School (Bob is the one doing the work).  
(Janet Wallace photos)

by Janet Wallace

“People are terrified of pruning,” says Bob Osborne. “Overcoming the fear is the most challenging part of the job.” Osborne, the owner of Corn Hill Nursery near Petitcodiac, New Brunswick, had volunteered to prune six apple trees that had been planted next to the Riverside Consolidated School in Riverside-Albert, N.B., about 15 years ago. A group of local residents came out to watch the process on May 1, 2013.

“There are many styles of prun-

ing.” Osborne says the pruned tree could look completely different if he trimmed it on another day. “There is no one right way to prune a tree; you just focus on the basic principle of opening up the tree to let in more light.”

“Start by taking out the cross branches,” he says while sawing. Cross branches grow across the path of other branches. They block the path of light into the centre of the tree and sometimes rub against other branches. “Once you take out the cross branches,

pruning gradually gets simpler and simpler. You need to step back as you prune and examine the structure,” recommends Osborne, standing back like an artist contemplating the work on an easel.

Can improper pruning kill a tree? Only if the tree is unhealthy and you prune far too hard. Pruning is a dwarfing process; you are taking away the ability of the tree to make food, explains Osborne. The leaves form sugars, which are used by the tree as they move downwards through the

branches and trunk. If there aren't enough leaves to produce much sugar, the sugar (food for the tree) will be used up by the time the sap reaches the roots. This could kill the tree, but it's unlikely, says Osborne, "Trees are very tough."

Osborne uses a small saw and pruning shears. "If you're going to do any amount of pruning," he recommends, "buy Felco pruning shears. They are the only ones that stand up. Some of the other brands don't even last a day." Granted, a day of pruning for Osborne may include pruning hundreds of bushes or trees. He sharpens the shears after a few days of pruning. The school orchard hasn't been pruned in years, if ever. "Ideally, you should prune a bit every year. That way, you can keep on top of the job," says Osborne. "You can cut one third of the branches each year."

He cuts the suckers – the branches that grow from the base of the tree.

## Corn Hill Nursery

Bob Osborne started Corn Hill Nursery, located outside of Petitcodiac, N.B., more than 30 years ago. Osborne specialized in hardy apple trees and rose bushes that could withstand challenging Maritime growing conditions (e.g. salt spray, cold winters, unreliable snow cover). The business now includes 80 acres (including plants in pots) under organic cultivation, a café, a mail-order component, and a retail outlet. From spring to fall, Osborne provides workshops (mostly free) at the nursery.

Osborne is committed to helping people garden. On CBC Radio's Moncton Morning show, Osborne (nicknamed the Garden Guru) hosts a weekly call-in show throughout the growing season. He is also a writer and a public speaker. When told about the budding school garden program in Riverside-Albert, N.B., Osborne did not hesitate to volunteer to prune the trees and donate plant stock.



Bob Osborne preparing to cut suckers growing from the base of the trunk.



A sharp knife is essential for scraping canker out of the tree.



The key is knowing what to cut. Bob Osborne is visualizing the future growth of the tree before deciding what to cut.



Making cider at Corn Hill nursery.



At Grapefest, Corn Hill nursery has more than plants for sale. Visitors can enjoy lunch, freshly-pressed cider, preserves, and apples, all while listening to live music.

This will encourage the tree to invest its energy into apples and productive branches, rather than suckers. If you time it right, you can graft the cut branches onto other trees. Pruning is best done between mid-March and early May, but grafting is done when the tree is dormant. So if you prune just before the buds emerge, you can graft.

Beware, however, of grafting suckers. You might not end up with the variety you expect. In the Maritimes, most productive apple trees are made up of two varieties grafted together. One variety produces good yields of tasty apples. Unfortunately these varieties are often not well suited to our climate. To help the tree survive winter, resist soil-borne diseases, and ripen before frost hits, the fruit variety is grafted onto hardy rootstock. You can often see the grafting scar on the

## Naked scars

“What do you use to cover the pruning scars?” asks a man observing the pruning demonstration. “Nothing,” says Osborne. “I don’t paint cuts. That can do more harm than good.”

Although there are many products on the market that are said to help trees heal from pruning, most (maybe all) orchardists now recommend Osborne’s approach of just leaving the wound uncovered. A wound-covering can trap moisture and disease-causing organisms inside the wood. Left uncovered, healthy trees will usually isolate the damage by growing new tissue from the heart of the tree.

The only exception to the rule is when diseases are involved. For example, Osborne recommends using latex paint to coat wood where canker has been scraped away. Other orchardists may apply protective substances where tree diseases are rampant and serious. Even that practice, however, is controversial. Follow the link “The Myth of Wound Dressings” on RuralLife.ca.

trunk. Suckers that emerge from below the scar come from the rootstock and won't produce the type of apples the parent tree grew.

Osborne is tackling a mess of intermingled branches. After clearing out the largest cross branches, he considers his next move. He imagines how the tree will grow in the next few years and picks one large limb to be the leader.

It's not always obvious which branch should be cut. "You have to choose. You decide who has which space. Think about filling space." As Osborne narrates the process, I start to see the tree through the eyes of a pruner. I no longer see just branches: I envision leaves and apples and picture how one branch will block light to the other.

After the demonstration, I try to learn more about pruning. For people who like to follow rules, they can find pruning directions in gardening books and online. I prefer to learn concepts and then follow my instincts. That's why I like Osborne's approach. Michael Phillips, author of "The Holistic Orchard," takes a transcendental approach to pruning. He suggests that, after looking at the branches, people should "see the 'light space' between the limbs.... Be the bud."

### WHY PRUNE?

**Greater yields:** Pruning reduces the number of potential fruit. Nonetheless, pruning does increase the total weight of the fruit because pruned trees produce larger fruit.

**Early ripening:** Allowing more light into the canopy of the tree encourages earlier ripening.

**Higher quality:** The fruit from pruned trees is larger, possibly with a higher sugar content and more flavor

quality fruit when you prune," says Osborne.

**Protection:** If branches extend too far from the trunk, the weight of the apples can be so great that the tree breaks. Also, branches that are low enough to be covered by snow drifts should be cut because they are vulnerable to breakage from snow load.

The goal is a tree that produces high yields of large, flavorful fruits that are low enough to be reached with a ladder. To keep the apples within reach, you can trim the top branches. Aim for an upward curve of the branches.

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**The fruit from pruned trees is larger, possibly with a higher sugar content and more flavor than fruit from neglected trees**

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than fruit from neglected trees. Apples from pruned trees have "a more airy and digestible texture," says Osborne. As well, the apples tend to have better color. If an apple is shaded, it won't develop a red color all around. Well-pruned trees allow greater exposure to light. "You get an all round better

### CANKER

Although Osborne recommends that people prune their trees at least every few years, he has a more hands-off approach to other aspects of orchard maintenance. He respects the ability of trees to heal on their own.

At the school garden, the apple trees had several ugly-looking black growths where branches emerged from the trunk or other branches. Canker, a fungal disease, had infected the plant tissue. Osborne was less concerned about this than most of the people watching the demonstration. He pointed out the many places where the tree had already recovered from canker.



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His main concern was where the canker had left a cavity that could trap water, thereby leading to other infections. In this case, he sawed off one of the branches and scraped out the rotten wood with a penknife. He recommended that we brush out the remainder of the dead material and cover the wound with latex paint. Varieties of trees differ in their vulnerability to canker. "It tends to develop in trees that are prone to winter injury."

By the end of the pruning session, the trees looked remarkably different. Osborne had transformed the dense tangles of branches into more open and streamlined trees. Debbie Spellman, the school custodian, summed it up beautifully, "He's a tree artist." After watching Osborne prune the trees, I look at apple trees differently. I see the path of sunlight and the potential for growth. In my own trees, I see the work that needs to be done and the apples that will come.

(Janet Wallace has started to prune the neglected apple trees on her property in New Horton, N.B. She is also a volunteer with the school garden project in nearby Riverside-Albert.)

## Pruning checklist

Cut the following:

- Diseased or injured branches
  - Cross branches
  - Branches that rub other branches
  - Uprights (branches that extend straight up from the main branches)
  - Very low branches that might get covered by snow and break
  - Tips of tall branches so the tree will be shorter and easier to pick
  - Suckers from the base of the tree
  - Very long branches
  - Old spurs (stubby branch-like growths a few inches in length)
- Removing old spurs will encourage the tree to develop new ones, and these will be more productive.

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