Pruning Demonstration for Deciduous Fruit Trees

The salubrious climate of Kern County allows residential planting of many deciduous fruit tree species. Unlike shade trees, deciduous fruit trees should be pruned every year before bud swell for optimum growth and yield. Pruning need not be complicated, but fruit trees are less forgiving than most shade tree species, and with incorrect pruning the yield of fruit will be reduced or eliminated, and the life of the tree will be shortened. Pruning diagrams or photographs in books or magazines may not be adequate to answer your questions.

Since pruning is a key step in promoting a large crop of tasty, mouth-watering fruit, Mario Viveros of the University of California Cooperative Extension will present two pruning demonstrations for deciduous fruits. Trees include apple, apricot, cherry, and almond, and he will also illustrate pruning of grapevines. The demonstrations will begin at 12:00 noon on both Wednesday, Dec. 15, and Thursday, Dec. 16, at the orchard adjacent to the UCCE office, 1031 S. Mt. Vernon Ave., Bakersfield. To reach the office, take Highway 58 and exit at Mt. Vernon, then proceed south for about 3/4 mile. Publications on pruning, fertilizer for fruit trees, and fruit tree varieties for the valley portion of Kern County will be available. There is no charge for attendance, nor is pre-registration required.

Fall Planted Bulbs

Perhaps we remember a welcome spring garden of crimson red and brilliant yellow tulips in a city where we lived. Or, we can still picture lavender crocus pushing up through ground with patches of snow still visible. Flowers such as these are planted as bulbs in fall before winter, so cold temperatures satisfy their internal chilling requirement, leading to flowering. Although some northern favorites don’t do well in the Bakersfield area, others do, and a number of bulbs or bulb-like plants from parts of the world, such as southern Africa, do quite well in our similar Mediterranean climate. We may also find the native *Brodiaea* providing a display of spring flowers in rangeland settings.

Bulbs are quite easy to add to a garden or shrub bed. (I’m going to use the term “bulb” instead of more specific botanical definitions for bulb-like structures, e.g., corms, tubers, rhizomes.) Planting depth should be about twice the height of the bulb. Some fertilizer containing phosphorus and a little nitrogen can be mixed with soil when planting, but nutrient levels in most home landscapes are sufficient for flowering in spring. Bulbs can be planted individually, or a bed can be excavated, the bulbs set in place, and covered all at once. A sunny location is generally best for foliage growth after flowering. In a favorable location bulbs are perennials, although their flower production may diminish with time. It is also possible to plant bulbs in containers and move them around as accent pieces. Bulbs can also be “forced,” which means satisfying their chilling requirement and then placing indoors in a suitable container for a one-time show.

Tulips are perhaps the most recognizable flower from fall-planted bulbs, but tulips have a higher chilling requirement than many others. While tulips are not at their best in the Bakersfield area, locations in the mountains or desert with additional chilling hours are more favorable for this flower. In contrast, *Narcissus* species, also called daffodils, do quite well on the San Joaquin valley floor. These have trumpet-shaped flowers, often in shades of yellow. Dozens of varieties exist, including bicolors and some with shorter or longer trumpets. ‘King Alfred’ is an old variety with especially large flowers. Of the bulbs popular in the North, *Crocus*, although not at its best here, will give a nice spring display. Purple is the
traditional color, but pinks and variegated flowers are available. *Muscari*, or grape hyacinth, is another northern plant that is easy to grow and successful here.

A number of bulbs from Mediterranean regions are less well known but are adapted to the Bakersfield area due to similarities in climate. *Freesia* has a waxy, fragrant, tubular flower, originally white, but breeders have introduced yellow, golden orange, pink, red and lavender-blue. *Ixia* is also known as African corn lily, with flowers of red, orange, yellow, or a couple of other colors on long slender stalks. The flowers last about a week when cut, making them a crisp accent to a bouquet. Blue *Scilla campanulata* (renamed *Endymion hispanicus*) from Spain resembles the English bluebell. There are many others, such as anemones, *Sparaxis*, *Tritonia*, and *Watsonia*. The most popular Mediterranean bulb is our area is probably *Ranunculus* with its multicolored papery flowers, fall-planted in Bakersfield, but spring-planted in cold winter areas.

A note of caution though: Bulbs may rot if planted where heavily irrigated in summer. You may need to dig them up after foliage has dried and store if used in a wet area. Many gardeners omit this step and simply let the bulbs fend for themselves, replanting as necessary.

**2011 Horticulture Study Tour (sixth in a series)**

Our heritage of landscape and garden design in California borrows from the rich tradition of Northwest Europe, the Mediterranean region, and Asia. I’ve been fortunate to have visited a number of botanic gardens and beautiful landscapes that exquisitely illustrate design principles and have withstood the test of time. These are well worth sharing, so in 2005 I began to offer an annual horticultural tour. The overall objective for each tour is to broaden participants' knowledge and appreciation for landscape design and plant selection. The tours also provide opportunities to learn about managing green space, water conservation, and other issues we face in California. Also, it’s an opportunity to learn about specific aspects of history and culture and experience the flavor of specific countries, depending on the destination.

In 2010, over a 10-day period, we visited selected gardens in Spain, and also had three free days to explore additional places. Although the snow in Barcelona was a big surprise, the weather warmed as we went south, and I’m so glad we spent time in cities of Andalusia. In the future, if I were to host a group interested in streetscapes and park designs, I would put Spain at the top of the list for examples of how to arrange outdoor spaces to accommodate pedestrians in wide and beautiful spaces. I do want to thank everyone with us in Spain, because each participant contributed to the experience of the group in varied ways. I learned so much from everyone, and for me the experience was overwhelmingly positive.

In late May and June, 2011, we plan another horticultural study tour, the sixth in our series, this time to Ireland and Scotland. We plan to travel across Ireland from the west to the east, since notable gardens are present on both sides of the island. Following a week in Ireland, we plan to go to gardens in Scotland to the north and west of Edinburgh, including crossing the Highlands to touch the west coast. Participants may elect to travel to Ireland only, or to Scotland, or to both. Although I provide structure for the tour and accompany the group, there is considerable free time, including a free days to use as individuals wish. This tour is designed to be participatory, since it is hoped each person will bring his or her knowledge and experience to share.

The dates for the 2011 tour are arrival May 28 with the first day of the tour in Ireland on May 29, and the last day of the tour (Scotland) June 10. There is no cutoff date for registration, but prices are not guaranteed until ticketed and may vary with currency fluctuations. For more information on the tour content, including a full itinerary by email, please contact John Karlik by email at jfkarlik@ucdavis.edu, or at 661 868-6220. For information on the travel arrangements and ticketing, please contact John Siston at Travel Gallery of Pasadena, john@travelgallery.com, 1-800-858-6999.

**Roof Rats**

Rats are troublesome, unnerving, and damaging pests, and readily adapt to life in urban areas. While Norway rats occur in all of the contiguous 48 states, the range of roof rats is limited to warm-winter areas, including southern states and the Pacific coast. Roof rats are common in Bakersfield and no respecter of a
The neighborhood’s socioeconomic status. Rather, availability of habitat, especially mature landscaping, is perhaps the most important determinant of their presence. Simple measures can limit their occurrence around homes and commercial buildings. If control is needed, acting quickly can limit a population buildup.

Roof rats are about 4-6 inches in length, not including the tail. They are agile climbers and may be seen during the day running along the top of fences or power lines, although they are more active at night. Roof rats prefer feeding and nesting sites above ground, which may include shelf areas in garden sheds, in dense vegetation, in garages above the rafters, or in attics where they can gain entry. Signs of roof rat presence include droppings, smudge marks along rafters, or indications of feeding. These animals prefer a diet of nuts and fruits, including citrus, with avocado as a favorite. Hollowed-out oranges, partially eaten nuts in the tree, and markings of front teeth can indicate rat activity. Occasionally roof rats will chew the tender bark on upper limbs of fruit trees. Another indicator is unusual interest in certain areas of a home landscape by a dog or cat, including efforts to paw or climb to investigate a new scent.

All pest animals need food, water, and habitat, including areas safe from predators and for nesting. Therefore, denial of easily obtainable food and favorable habitat will limit their presence. Many studies have shown that habitat modification is a key to limiting rat populations, since even after a vigorous trapping or baiting program the population can rebound unless habitat is denied. Around Bakersfield, dense groundcovers or vines on fences or trees make excellent habitat, such as English or Algerian ivy, star jasmine, and creeping fig. The latter provides a food source as well in the figs it bears. To limit rat habitat, vines and groundcovers should be thinned. Trees should be cut back so branches are two feet or more from buildings so rats cannot gain access to roofs. Also, wood piles, brush, household outdoor storage (junk) should be neatly stacked and placed so rats do not have easy paths to cover and food. Open dumpsters and trash cans provide ready sources of food, as do pet food dishes outside—one might be feeding the whole neighborhood if dog or cat food is left outside at night. Trash cans should be covered and food limited to what a pet will eat. For buildings, exclusion is the most important control measure. Holes or openings 1/4 inch or larger should be sealed with wire, wire mesh, metal, or hard material such as concrete. Soft materials such as caulk or wood can be gnawed through.

If a single animal is found, direct population control can be begun since roof rats can produce 3-5 litters per year with 5-8 young per litter. Control inside buildings is a subject in itself; the following comments will focus on the outdoor environment.

Traps are effective if placed and baited properly. Rats are very aware of changes in their environment and will avoid new objects, so traps should be placed directly in runways, including tacking to trees or fences where the animals are known to pass. Baits can include nut meat, dried fruit, or bacon. Tying the bait to the trigger will prevent snatches of the food, and if the trap is sprung without catching the rat it will be very difficult to catch that rat again. Pre-baiting is often helpful, which means fastening the bait but not setting the trap. Thus, the animal becomes familiar with the trap and becomes accustomed to pulling on the bait. Once skittishness is diminished—the bait is taken once or twice—the trap can be set. Trapping programs should be short and decisive, meaning multiple traps set in most or all the places where activity has been noticed. Obviously, traps should be set where pets or children cannot reach them.

Baits can be very effective, but be sure to follow label directions for effectiveness and safety. For roof rats, baits may be placed above ground where children and pets will not encounter them. Baits are sold as feeding trays, bait packs, or in paraffin blocks that may be tacked to trees. Some baits may require multiple feedings for an effective dose to be accumulated, which means a continuous supply of the bait. Again, read the label when using any pesticide product for instructions and safety precautions.

Ultrasonic generators and repellents have not been shown to be effective in research trials. Glue boards are a better control tactic for mice than for rats.

For additional information, the Pest Note entitled Rats is a peer-reviewed source of practical information about rat biology and control and is available at the UC IPM website, http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu. Kern County Mosquito and Vector Control is another valuable source of help.

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University of California and U.S. Department of Agriculture Cooperating.