



# PHILADELPHIA ORCHARD PROJECT

[www.phillyorchards.org](http://www.phillyorchards.org)

## SUMMARY OF ORCHARD CARE

This sheet is an introduction to the basics of orchard care, summarizing the activities needed to support a healthy orchard. It is not a how-to guide, but intended as an overview to familiarize Philadelphia Orchard Project partners with what is expected of them as orchard stewards.

### **BASIC ORCHARD CARE CALENDAR**

**SPRING:** monitoring, watering as necessary, weeding, fertilizing, mulching, pruning, harvesting

**SUMMER:** monitoring, watering, weeding, mulching, thinning, harvesting

**FALL:** monitoring, watering as necessary, weeding, mulching, harvesting

**WINTER:** pruning

### **MONITORING**

The first step in being a good orchard steward or caretaker is regular observation and monitoring. The steward should walk through the orchard several times a week during the growing season, taking care to note the health of plants as well as any other important conditions. Good monitoring will help the steward to know when other activities are needed.

## **WATERING**

One of the most important activities in orchard care is regular watering. Young orchards need frequent watering when there isn't adequate rainfall, especially during the summer. Each watering should be generally equal to an inch of rain or 5-10 gallons per tree.

### *1<sup>st</sup> Year*

Spring Plantings: Water every other day for the first 3 weeks. Water twice a week for the second three weeks. Then once a week through the end of October. Perennials and groundcovers may need more frequent watering in their first season.

Fall Plantings: In dry weather, water twice a week through the end of November.

### *2<sup>nd</sup> Year and Beyond*

During warm weather, orchards should be watered once a week when they don't receive 1" of rainfall. Older, established orchards may need watering only in severe drought conditions.

## **WEEDING**

Weeds can be a major competitor for water, light, and nutrients. Orchards, especially in their first year, should be weeded fairly frequently to give orchard plants the best chance to succeed. Always attempt to pull weeds out with their roots. As an orchard matures and its understory and groundcovers fill in, fewer new weeds will appear.

## **HARVESTING**

Harvesting is another essential and of course rewarding orchard maintenance activity. Every edible plant has its own harvest time and a diverse orchard will produce food from Spring through Fall. With a few exceptions, most fruit and nuts should be harvested when ripe. Fallen fruit should also be picked up to avoid attracting pests to the orchard.

## **PRUNING**

Pruning is the controlling of plant growth through the cutting and removal of branches. Although trees can be healthy and productive without it, good pruning can help to increase production and resistance to pests and disease. Dormant season pruning (late winter) is best for most of the more common fruit trees. It is important to create good tree structure, especially in the first few years of growth. Although different types of trees are happier with different forms or shapes, the basic idea is create good spacing between the branches to let in air and light to all parts of the tree. Pruning during the growing season may also sometimes be necessary. Thinning of fruits in early summer can also increase yield and quality. Many berry bushes and vines are also more productive with annual pruning.

## **PEST & DISEASE CONTROL**

Some of the most important things to look for in monitoring orchard plants are pests and disease. It is important to know that most insects in an orchard are not pests. Some provide essential services like pollination and many others actually eat pest insects. The important thing to notice is damage to orchard plants caused by insects or disease: look for discolored leaves, unusual growth, holes in leaves, stems, or fruit, etc. Also look out for squirrels and other non-insect pests that may be damaging crops or plants.

Each pest or disease may have a different treatment strategy, from hand removal to predator release to spraying of water or soap. It is important to consult with an expert or reference book before attempting to treat a problem.

## **SOIL CARE**

Healthy soil is the ultimate key to happy orchard plants. The most important time to improve soil quality is during planting, but it may also be necessary to do so in following years. It is recommended to test your soil ([www.aasl.psu.edu/SSFT.HTM](http://www.aasl.psu.edu/SSFT.HTM)) every two years to find out what nutrients may be needed. Mulch should be added to cover thin spots at any time of year. The best time of year to add high fertility compost is in the spring.

## **MORE INFORMATION ON ORCHARD CARE**

Please contact the Philadelphia Orchard Project ([www.phillyorchards.org](http://www.phillyorchards.org)) for further guidance on orchard care. Although it doesn't maintain orchards, the organization can provide advice and connect orchard stewards to other resources. A good on-line resource is the Earthworks Urban Orchard Care manual ([www.earthworksboston.org/page/uogrow](http://www.earthworksboston.org/page/uogrow)). A good source for natural pest control and other supplies is Gardens Alive ([www.gardensalive.com](http://www.gardensalive.com)).

### **RECOMMENDED READING:**

*The Backyard Orchardist* and *The Backyard Berry Book*, Stella Otto  
*The Pruning Book* and *Uncommon Fruits for Every Garden*, Lee Reich  
*Designing and Maintaining Your Edible Landscape Naturally*, Robert Kourik  
*Orchard Almanac*, Stephen Page and Joe Smiley