



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, holistic sprays, compost/

MONITORING mulch, thinning, harvesting

SUMMER: monitoring, watering, weeding, emergency pruning, holistic sprays, harvesting

FALL: monitoring, watering as necessary, weeding, holistic sprays, compost, harvesting

WINTER: monitoring, pruning

The first step in being a good orchard 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 caretaker to know when other activities are needed. The caretaker should report to their assigned POP liaison on the orchard's status at least once a month.

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 approximately 5 gallons per tree.

1st Year

Spring Plantings: Water twice a week for the first month, 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.

2nd Year and Beyond

During warm weather, orchards should be watered once a week when they don't receive 1 inch 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. Plan monthly weeding sessions during the establishment years of an orchard. Always attempt to pull weeds out with their roots. As an orchard matures and its understory fills 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 (European pears),



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 (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 to create good spacing between the branches to let in air and light to all parts of the tree. Always prune out any dead or diseased material any time of year. Thinning of fruits in early summer can increase yield and quality. Many berry bushes and vines are also more productive with annual pruning. POP will provide assistance and training with winter pruning until the orchard caretakers are comfortable proceeding on their own.

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 use of organic and holistic sprays. 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 (aasl.psu.edu/SSFT.HTM) every two years to find out what nutrients may be needed. Mulch can be added to cover thin spots at any time of year. It is good practice to add compost or apply compost tea in late fall or early spring.

MORE INFORMATION ON ORCHARD CARE

Please contact the Philadelphia Orchard Project (phillyorchards.org) for further guidance on orchard care. Although POP partners are expected to accomplish all basic maintenance tasks for their orchards, the organization does provide ongoing technical assistance to its partners and can connect orchard stewards to additional resources. POP's website now contains a searchable blog with articles on many orchard care topics, as well as pages of links to other resources.

RECOMMENDED READING:

The Holistic Orchard, Michael Phillips

The Apple Grower, Michael Phillips

The Organic Gardener's Handbook of Natural Insect and Disease Control, Ellis and Bradley

Grow Fruit Naturally, Lee Reich

The Pruning Book, Lee Reich



Creating a Forest Garden, Martin Crawford

The Backyard Orchardist, Stella Otto

The Backyard Berry Book, Stella Otto

Designing and Maintaining Your Edible Landscape Naturally, Robert Kourik