Happy New Year and best wishes for a fantastic and productive 2016. I hope the contents of this newsletter are timely and useful. As always, please contact our office if we can help you with production matters. And we make house calls!

**Marketing Produce to Schools**
School lunch programs are a potential buyer for fresh produce. Although federal laws dictate what may be served and how food is purchased, schools can buy local fruits and vegetables. In Arkansas the 5 most popular crops sold to schools (in order of greatest demand) are apples, strawberries, red potatoes, watermelon, and sweet potatoes.

The farm to school relationship can provide an extra and reliable market for producers. There are four pathways through which farmers can sell food to schools. Three of these involve third party distributors, but farmers may sell directly to the school. This arrangement must be planned in advance. Schools are required to bid out their food purchases, and interested schools and farmers may work together to ensure bids are correctly prepared. Similarly, schools must be correctly invoiced once produce is delivered to ensure prompt payment.

If you are interested in more information about selling your crops to schools, contact our office.

**Sharp Tools and Eyes Improve Winter Pruning Results**
It’s nearly time to begin pruning fruit trees. Extension specialists recommend holding off on pruning until later in winter and greatest chances of extreme cold weather have passed. Take time now to replace or recondition pruning tools so they are sharp and easy to use. Good tools in good hands produce quality cuts that heal quickly and decrease fatigue.

Fruit species dictates the pruning method. For peaches, the objective of pruning is to create tree architecture that readily permits light penetration down into the canopy. The result is a bowl shaped canopy outlined by larger scaffold branches capable of supporting a heavy fruit load. By default, many flower buds are also removed and mid-season thinning requirements are reduced. Fruit is produced on one year old wood. On apple and pear trees, correctly executed annual pruning results in a tree that is generally broader at its base and tapering toward its top, much like a Christmas tree. Take care to leave spurs, the two-year or older wood that produces fruit.
A few general guidelines for correct pruning follow.

- Pruning should be planned to maintain desired tree height and balance.
- Always remove wood that is dead, diseased, or damaged first.
- Water sprouts are unproductive and should be removed unless they are to be trained and used for future production.
- Remove suckers at base of tree.
- On smaller wood, make cuts just above a bud.
- Makes clean cuts just above the limb collar to promote quick healing.
- If limbs cross and rub, remove those which are least desirable.
- Remove low hanging limbs that will droop to the ground when loaded with fruit.
- Never remove more than one-third of the top in one season.
- Do not fertilize following heavy pruning; otherwise excessive regrowth is encouraged.
- Train small limbs during or soon after pruning to establish correct crotch angle.

Figure 6: Scaffold or main limbs spacing, looking down on the tree; B, C and D are most satisfactory; A is difficult to train and E is unsatisfactory.

Right: Water sprouts are new growth and are generally unproductive wood. In apples and pears they should remain if needed to reshape or rejuvenate a tree; otherwise they should be removed. In peaches, water sprouts and shoots in center of tree are removed, with shoots at the canopy periphery headed back to concentrate blooming and fruit development. Photo: learn2grow.com

Left: When making cuts take care that the collar is not damaged. For large, heavy limbs, cuts should be made in numerical order as shown. This prevents bark ripping away from bottom of collar when limb falls. Drawing: Missouri Extension Service

Right: Training young trees or young limbs so they have a broad crotch angle better able to support a heavy fruit load. Stakes shown in drawing may be better suited to home gardens, but young limbs may be tied to tree trunk or lower limbs. Limb spreaders shown on first page also serve this purpose.

Above Left: Unpruned blueberry bush. Photo: ask.extension.org
Above Right: Highbush blueberry following pruning. Although these are different plants, notice older and less productive canes in center of pruned plant have been removed. Damaged, diseased, or rubbing canes are gone. Best quality and largest berries are produced on young (1 year), vigorous canes less than 1 inch in diameter. Since blueberries flower and produce fruit on cane ends, don’t head back blueberries except in new plantings. Photo: University of Kentucky

Save the Date

- January 16: Private Applicator Training for restricted-use pesticide licenses, Gravette, 12:00 to 3:00. Call 479-271-1060 to register.
- January 19: North Arkansas Pumpkin Grower Meeting, Washington County Extension Office (Fayetteville). 10:00 to 2:00. Lunch served. Call 479-444-1755 to register.
- January 22: Arkansas Farmers Market Association annual meeting, Little Rock, 9:00-3:00. Call 479-271-1060 for more information.
- February 2016: Back to the Farm. See class information on last page of newsletter.
Benefits of keeping fruit trees correctly pruned:
- Lengthen productive life of tree (reduce damage from wind, ice, fruit weight, etc.)
- Increase ease of harvesting by keeping tree at manageable size
- Improve fruit quality (size, flavor, color)
- Force growth of new wood to replace older damaged or diseased wood

**Plan Now to Attack San Jose Scale**
Most fruit trees are susceptible to damage from scale insects. Like other species, San Jose scale is a sap-sucking insect that can reduce tree vigor and fruit yield and quality. Monitor pruning for presence of scale in the “black cap” (overwintering) stage of growth. If San Jose scale has been a problem in past years, consider purchasing pheromones traps now. These should be placed in the upper canopy of previously infested trees by March 15. Monitor for males caught in traps until April 15. Treatment should be made when trees are just breaking dormancy by application of a 2% dormant or horticultural oil (same type product; dormant refers to application timing) mixed with an appropriate insecticide. For apples/pears these include Lorsban and Supracide applied at green tip. Insecticides for stone fruits include Admire Pro, Assail, Belay, Centaur, Esteem, Movanto, and Aza Direct (OMRI approved) applied at shuck split. Never apply Captan within 2 weeks or sulfur sprays within 30 days before or after an oil application.

**Specialty Varieties Not Necessarily Small Potatoes**
These days consumers are increasingly interested in non-traditional crops. Irish potatoes are no exception. The traditional brown skin, white flesh Russet is only one of many varieties. In the fresh potato market its consumption has been in decline for a number of years. Research from Colorado State University indicates consumers are willing to pay a premium for specialty potatoes, particularly high quality tubers with unique characteristics. In the last 5 years, economists have noted a 73% increase in volume sales and 62% increase in specialty potato crop value.

Specialty potatoes have attributes such as distinctive skin and flesh color, texture, and flavor. Some local restaurants already feature local crops, and it may be possible to develop a specialty potato market among an existing restaurant or farmer’s market customer base. Research has shown that potatoes with darker, pigmented skin are higher in antioxidants, and therefore a healthier potato. Playing up this benefit may appeal to health-conscious consumers and provide opportunity for premium prices. Finally, CSU researchers determined consumers are willing to pay more for locally grown crops. The Arkansas Grown label already exists, but local markets might consider establishing a designation that hits closer to home, such as “Benton County Grown”, catering to local consumers.

**Did you know?**
Several plant viruses that cause crop loss also live in weeds? Insects that feed on weeds and then move to crop plants can spread viruses. Therefore careful insect and weed control may help prevent new infections.
Back to the Farm
PRACTICAL TRAINING FOR SMALL OR BEGINNING FARMERS.

Classes conducted on Monday nights in Russellville (105 West B Street) and on Tuesday nights in Fayetteville (Whitaker Arena, 1885 W. Knapp Drive), from 6 to 8 pm, for each session at both locations. Call 479-271-1060 (northwest AR) or 479-968-4098 (AR River Valley) to register. NO COST TO REGISTER OR ATTEND, but class size is limited.

FEB. 1, 2: Farm Business Management: writing business plans, developing financial plans, credit and creditors, insurance needs, recordkeeping, banking

FEB. 8, 9: Specialty Crop Production: From Farm to Fork: basics of crop production, matching horticultural crops to farm resources, crop management, irrigation, GAP and food safety

FEB. 15, 16: Marketing Your Farm: wholesale and direct marketing, branding, agritourism, recognizing market demand, Farmers market best practices

FEB. 22, 23: Livestock Production on Small Acreages: breed selection, purchasing tips, fencing, watering, housing requirements, feeding livestock, pasture management, food safety