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WEEKEND BREAK

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The. pruning



Now well-pruned, this 75-plus-year-old tree on Ron Baldwin's property will continue to produce apples for a long time.



Ron Baldwin photos

When dried, apple prunings are valued for barbecuing and smoking.

Yes, you will get hurt trimming your trees, but you may also connect with your neighbors

By **RON BALDWIN**
 For *The Daily Astorian*

When my wife and I bought our home in Chinook across from the old Chinook school, it had three fruit trees, only one of which I decided to keep, an overgrown apple tree with OK apples but definitely in need of reshaping. I pruned it back with a vengeance.

Then I left it unpruned for a few years, and this spring it was time to grab the saw, shears and ladder.

The tree is common of many 75-plus-year-old apple trees in the Columbia-Pacific region. No one really knows what variety they are, but each tree produces a unique apple. Some produce few apples, others produce many. Most have gone through many prunings by owners of varying pruning skill levels.

The last week in March is a little late for pruning but not unreasonably so. I always say the best time to prune is when the shears are in your hand.

Once the decision was made and the tools were sharpened, I waited for the right day and waded right into a severe pruning job on this old girl. Several years of water sprouts hit the ground first, then I removed all the dead wood and every branch that's growing toward the center of the tree.

We now have a situation where you want to climb all over this tree and cut some of its parts off. The tree has altogether different ideas and will do everything it can to send you to the hospital.

You soon discover that you can't really get to some of the work without actually climbing the tree. That green moss covering the branches is there specifically to send you sprawling to the ground, the little spikes on the branches are there to tear your shirt and pants, and the water sprouts are there to remove your hat and scrape your ears off. Just avoiding falling and smashing your bones is a challenge.

In the middle of this multi-day process the inevitable storm appears and drives you back into the house. I left the ladder under the tree and the wind blew it over. This created a storm of concern for my welfare as no fewer than five neighbors called to ask if I was OK. They all feared that I had fallen and broken something. Each call included a conversation about all manner of things.

At the post office: "See you took on that apple."

At the supermarket: "Wow! You really took some out of that apple tree."

At a coffee shop: "Hope you've got your insurance payed up."

It was like a regular parade of neighbors stopping by, in their cars and on foot, to chat while I was actually pruning, including several who said they had attended school across the street.

"We used to steal apples off your tree," they said.

Of course, it wasn't my tree then. The old house may have hosted 10 or more families in its 128 years, and many owners could have been victims of this wild caper. The niece of one longtime resident said her aunt knew about the apple stealing, and that she delighted in watching it all happening.

After all the sawing and shearing, you look

down and realize: Holy smokes! What am I going to do with all that brush laying on the ground?

Now comes the real work. Now you have to make choices: (1) Cut the prunings into pieces to use on the barbecue in the fall; (2) cut the prunings into pieces, move them to the burn pile and cover until they finally dry out enough to burn; or (3) cut the prunings into pieces and let one of the home-smoker types that drive by take the bulk of the wood, and you keep a smaller pile to burn.

Whatever choice you make, realize that there are two commonalities with a project like this.

One: You will hurt, either from a face lashing from an uncooperative branch, leg and arm lacerations from climbing the tree, or just the endless bending over to cut up and dispose of the brush.

Two: It will take you at least three times your initial estimate of the total time involved.

All the work and pain finally paid off, as the former grandeur of the tree's early shape began to appear.

As I looked over the project with some pride, I realized that I'd not only brought back a community icon, but I had connected personally with my neighbors more than I had in years.

Modern life can give you a feeling of being isolated and alone in the world, but if you want to get connected with your neighbors, all you have to do is take those pruning tools out to a tree, or plant a new lawn, or build a new fence.

You'll soon have plenty of conversation to fill your day.

Ron Baldwin is a musician, photographer and writer living in Chinook, Wash.



Ron Baldwin