

Why are my baby apples falling off the tree?

This question was asked by a very concerned gardener during one of my recent visits at a local farmers' market. There is no simple, direct answer.

Fruit drop as it is called, typically happens during the month of June for us here in Minnesota.

There are several things that can make an apple, pear and sometimes a cherry tree shed its fruit: late frosts, excessive heat or cold, abrupt changes in humidity, poor pollination and even excessive fruit on the tree.

Many apple varieties have heavy fruit production every other year. So, in the "on year", they would have an abundance of flowers and with luck, successful pollination. This results in an overabundance of immature apples/pears. If there are no environmental issues, the fruit tree recognizes that it needs to conserve energy and begins to cut off the supply of nutrients to some of the immature fruit. These immature apples/pears begin to fall from the mother tree near the month of June. This dropping of excess fruit is called the fruit drop or June apple drop.

If you were to examine an apple/pear tree a couple of weeks after it had flowered, you would discover baby fruits hanging from an elongated, knobby growth called a fruit spur. From this fruit spur you would see anywhere from 2 to 6 or 8 baby fruits. As they begin to grow, 2 or maybe 3 of the baby fruits will be larger looking and greener than the others on that spur. The smaller/immature fruits will begin to take on a pale green to light yellow color. If you take your finger, you can give one of these smaller fruits a little flick and it will fall from the fruit spur. There, you just gave mother nature a helping hand.

Most of us like to eat large healthy looking apples/pears. The size of the maturing will be dependent on the number of fruit on the fruit tree. If you want larger fruit, then you will need to thin out some of the apples/pears on the tree. Take your hand pruner and snip off all but one fruit per fruit spur. Now step back a bit and see how many fruits are in a given area of the fruit tree. You need to have a spacing of 6 to 8 inches between each remaining fruit.

Here's a simple way to measure this distance. Take your adult hand, make a fist and now extend your thumb and little finger in opposite directions away from the fist. The distance from the tip of the thumb to the tip of the little finger is the correct spacing between apples/pears.

Don't forget to keep your pruners clean and sharp. Clean the cutting edges with either a solution of 10% bleach mixed with water or alcohol (isopropyl or denatured).

You will find Isanti County Master Gardeners each week at either the Isanti Family Farmers Market on Fridays or the Cambridge Farmers Market on Saturdays from May thru October. Bring us your questions or just come to visit.

See you at the farmers markets & happy gardening