

Pruning is a time consuming, costly operation. Along with thinning, it is one of the major production costs. Studies from other areas show 18 to 23 hours labor per acre for pruning, and 21 to 35 hours for thinning. Other studies made found that if mechanical top-hedging, followed by some thinning cuts was done pruning time could be cut in half. Topping in summer after harvest, to promote better fruit hanger limb development and height control, may be practical if costs are not prohibitive.

Thinning

Peach trees often set more fruit than can be matured to marketable size, even though attempts are made to avoid excess cropping by careful pruning. The fruit should be thinned before the pits harden, leaving one fruit approximately every 6 in (16 cm) along the branches, depending on the cultivar and market conditions. Thinning reduces total poundage, but profit depends on the price as related to size. Determine the extent of thinning in the basis of market demands and response of the cultivar to thinning.

For maximum effect on improving size and early ripening, thinning should be done as early as possible. Some growers make a first thinning during bloom, when conditions favor very heavy fruit set. At present, no recommendations are available on the use of chemical sprays for thinning peach fruits under Florida conditions.

Harvesting and Marketing

Peaches are harvested when nearly mature, but still firm enough to ship well. Change in ground color is used to judge picking stage. Peaches for local markets can be picked more mature than those to be shipped long distances. A rapid increase in quality and size occurs during the ripening stage, and very careful judgement is necessary to obtain maximum maturity while avoiding losses due to over-maturity.

Pick and handle fruit very carefully to prevent bruising. Peaches do not mature uniformly on the trees, and therefore it is necessary to pick over the orchard 3 to 4 times at 2-day intervals in order to obtain fruit that have reached the right stage for marketing.

Peaches must be carefully graded, sized, brushed, cooled, and packed for long distance shipment. This requires a sizeable investment in a packinghouse which isn't likely to prove economically feasible with much less than 100 to 150 acres (40 to 60 h).

Growers having up to 20 acres (8 h) may be able to sell by customer picking or on local markets without extensive packing. In such orchards a succession of cultivars is essential. It is poor practice to transport fruit more than a few miles to a packinghouse, so growers need to plan their market outlets carefully before planting.