By Buzz Bertolero

The Dirt Gardener

Q: The trees in our neighborhood have matured around us, so we have virtually no areas of full sun in our yard. We now only get six to seven hours of morning and early-afternoon sun during the summer. Our peach, nectarine and cherry trees are not doing well because of the shade, so we're in the process of replacing them. Are there any varieties of fruit trees, like the Asian pear or persimmon, that can produce reasonably well in these conditions?

A: Any plant that receives six or more hours of direct sunlight per day is considered to be in a sunny location. It doesn't need to be continuous, so your yard is still okay for growing a variety of fruit trees.

I'd only consider a persimmon if the area received little or no summer irrigation. The new selection of bareroot or packaged fruit trees is now starting to arrive at your favorite garden center. You should find a selection of standard, semi-dwarf and other types of dwarf trees.

But first, you need to have a good idea of just how big a mature tree is right for your yard.

For many yards, a semi-dwarf fruit tree is too big as they can reach a height of 15 feet or more with a 10-foot spread. You can keep these trees smaller if you prune diligently each winter. In addition, I'd prune the branches so they are spaced farther apart to increase the light in the center and on the shadiest side of the tree.

I suspect the current trees are declining for reasons other than the lack of sun exposure. Established trees decline from root rot and borers from constant summer irrigation, so you don't want to plant under them.

Apples, pears and Asian pears are the exception and do fine with frequent watering, while peaches, nectarines, cherries, persimmons and others suffer.

With our smaller yards, it's important to plant the right types of trees that complement the rest of your yard's plants. The nursery professional at your favorite garden center is a great resource for this type of information.

Q: When should our raspberry plants be pruned? They currently have lots of foliage and some fruit.

A: The best time to prune raspberries is after the crop has been harvested. This also includes blackberries. The timing varies as some varieties bear two crops each year while others only one.

The pruning is very simple, if the plants are being grown on some type of trellis structure. A fence is a poor choice as you're helpless in preventing the vines from intruding into your neighbors yard.

The fruit-bearing canes are completely removed by cutting them off at the ground, as they will never produce again. The next crop will be borne on the new shoots at the base of the plants. This growth is then tied to the structure replacing the current growth.

Blackberries and raspberries only bear fruit on the second-year canes. The non-productive vegetation is removed to keep the plants aggressive growth habit contained.

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CAPTION: This winter, prune fruit trees to space branches farther apart to increase the light in the center and on the shadiest side of the tree.