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WINTER PROTECTION OF FRUITS
By Neil W. Miles

The time to put your home orchard to bed for the winter is right now. A few chores properly done now before winter sets in will make the home orchard look better and will put it in the best conditions to survive winter.

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Raspberries and strawberries will produce best if protected from the winter elements. A 4- to 6-inch layer of hay, straw or similar weed-free material placed over the strawberry row will prevent low temperature injury to the strawberry crowns and roots. Raspberry canes are protected by bending them to the ground and covering them with soil.

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Be sure the mouse guards around your fruit trees are intact and in place. Rodent damage (eating of the bark of the tree) can be prevented by placing a cylinder of 1/4-inch hardware cloth, about 6 inches in diameter and 18 inches in length, around the trunk of the tree. Set this cylinder about 1 to 2 inches into the ground.

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A clean, neat orchard is usually a trouble-free orchard. First, mice and other rodents will not be attracted by rotting fruit or other debris which may otherwise be left on the ground. Also, mice do not find nesting sites when long grass and weeds are removed from the orchard. Secondly, cleaning up the fallen fruit, foliage and other debris from the orchard floor will eliminate a source of insect and disease problems for the coming year.

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Fruit trees are best equipped to withstand the stresses of a cold winter if the tissues of the plant are fully dormant and hardened off before the cold weather begins. Practices which encourage late growth such as watering, fertilizing, and pruning should be delayed at least until after a few killing frosts. Then you will be sure the plant is fully dormant and will not begin growth during warm days in early fall.

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The root system of a dwarf fruit tree may not be fully hardy. It should be protected from the winter by applying an organic mulch 6 to 8 inches deep around the trunk of the tree and under the branches. But do not apply this mulch for a few weeks. If applied too early, rodents will use this mulched area for a nesting site.

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