

Trimming The Fat

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Growers may need to skirt and prune low-hanging branches to make their groves more suited for mechanical harvesters.

The cost to prepare a citrus grove for mechanical harvesting varies by the age and size of the trees and location of the grove.

Traditional trees have low-hanging branches along the lower canopy which hang very close to the soil surface and are not well suited for mechanical harvesting machines. These trees were grown in citrus nurseries and headed (branched) at about 16 inches to form branching that would become the scaffold limbs of the mature tree. Low-hanging branches can interfere with trunk shaking machines and catch frames that collect the fruit when shaken from the tree.

There are four steps to retrofit trees in traditional groves: skirting, hand pruning, brush removal, and micro-sprayer irrigation realignment. Skirting is required to gain access to attach trunk shakers to improve mechanical harvesting operations. When a catch frame is used to receive the fruit as it is shaken off the tree, clearance is also required regardless of whether a trunk shaker or the canopy shaker machine

is used. Skirting should be 36 inches at the dripline and taper to about 24 to 30 inches near the trunk line.

Following mechanical skirting, hand pruning with a chain saw may be required to remove large branches and scaffold limbs near the trunk. There should be a minimum of 20 to 24 inches from the ground to the first scaffold limb on the tree trunk. A straight trunk with 16 to 18 inches above the bud

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