

Time to Sharpen the Pruning Tools

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When it comes to pruning plants, many gardeners panic, saying they are not sure they know what to do. No worries - it's really pretty easy once you know the basics.

There are several reasons for pruning your landscape trees and shrubs. One of the most common reasons is that a plant is overgrown and needs some shaping up.

Another reason to prune is to open up fruit trees so that the sunlight can penetrate the canopy; this leads to increased fruit production.

Removing damaged or diseased wood, removing pest problems, improving appearance, and insuring health and structural soundness are other reasons to prune.

Pruning deciduous trees when they are young will help ensure a good sound branch structure in later years.

To get started pruning deciduous trees (more on evergreens in the coming weeks), make sure you have the right equipment. Pruning shears or hand shears are great for small branches, under one-half inch.

Branches that are a half into to an inch should be pruned with longer-handled loppers and anything over an inch should be pruned with a saw.

Warning - don't use a chain saw unless you have personal protection and have gone through some type of chain saw training. Bad accidents happen if you don't do these!

Start by removing any broken or damaged, diseased branches.

After you do this, step back and view the tree. Are there branches that are crossing each other or branches that are growing into the center of the tree? If so, pick a few to remove. Start with those that are crossing each other and then take a few out that are growing towards the middle of the tree.

Step back again and look at the overall tree. Do the branches have good crotch angles? Crotch angles are the angle where the branch comes out of the trunk of the tree.

The perfect crotch angle is between 45 and 60 degrees. A narrow crotch angle results in weak branches.

Therefore, look for any branches that have narrow crotch angles and remove a few of them.

Step back again. You shouldn't remove more than one-third of the branches in a single year.

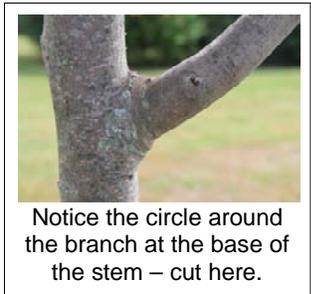
Doing this encourages a lot of regrowth that will have to be addressed the next time you prune.

If you haven't removed more than one-third, continue opening up the center of the tree and removing narrow crotch angles until you reach this mark.

Make good pruning cuts. Don't leave stubs and don't cut flush to the trunk. You will notice a ring around the base of the branch; cut at this ring. It's also called the branch bark collar.

If you have two branches coming together at the trunk, cut one of the branches straight across rather than in the middle. In other words, shoot for the smallest cut possible.

Next week more on pruning shrubs, including rejuvenation pruning.



Notice the circle around the branch at the base of the stem – cut here.



This elm has many narrow crotch angles that need to be remedied by pruning