

A person wearing a blue plaid shirt, black pants, an orange helmet, and safety glasses is using a long, black telescopic power pruner to trim a high branch of a large tree. The person is standing on a dirt path in a grassy area with many trees in the background. The pruner has a long black shaft and a cutting head with orange accents. The person is holding the shaft with both hands, looking up at the branch being cut.

Telescopic power pruners, such as the pictured Stihl HT 131, enable the operator to trim branches up to 5m from the ground. These are popular tools, but care needs to be taken when cutting heavy branches. This is to protect both the operator and the tree.

Think before you prune

James de Haviland looks at how to prune troublesome low branches and explores some of the best products on offer

There are essentially two main types of dedicated petrol powered pole saw on offer; fixed length units with a reach of up to around 3.0m and telescopic designs that may extend to perhaps 4.50 to 5.00m. The saw element will be based around a 10, 12 or possibly 14in guide bar.

Combination tools, where the working element can be swapped between a brushcutter, saw head or myriad of other tools are a further alternative. These are well worth considering where a pole pruner is less likely to see anything other than occasional use.

The downside is that combination tool prices are typically higher than dedicated tools.

A pole pruner attachment on its own could cost over £300. Quality rigid pole saw prices vary a great deal, but budget around £400 as a starting point.

Some designs allow the standard shaft of rigid units to be extended to 500 or 1,000mm. These extra lengths can be bought at a later date, but if you need longer reach consider telescopic units from the outset. These will carry a premium of typically £50 to £100 but this can be less than opting for an extended non-telescopic designs.

Reach and power

For safety, a pruner needs to be operated at around 60 degrees to the branch. This is to allow pruned material to fall without hitting the operator. As such, the actual reach of a pruner is less than its total length. As a rule, it pays to buy a longer pruner than you may think you need.

Although combination tool power units are increasingly offered in two-stroke or four-stroke designs, dedicated power pruners are more likely to stick with a two-stroke of around 20 to 30cc developing 0.6 to 1.5kW in power output. But you may find more powerful units on offer. The key consideration is weight as a heavy tool can be difficult to place accurately. Vibration levels on some designs can be quite high so consider this if the tool is to be worked for extended periods.

In most cases, a body harness is supplied to help support the weight of the tool when moving it around, but a support harness may also be supplied for use in work.

Working a pole saw is straightforward for thin, lighter branches. These can be cut in one action from the top down. Thicker and heavier branches need cutting with care.

Loop handles are typically fitted to combi tool or split shaft models, the four-stroke Makita EX250LH having a choice of five different attachments. You need to do a few sums before assuming a multiple tool design is a more cost effective buy than a dedicated alternative.



Can you prune and chop as you wish?

When we last looked at power pruners, we mentioned the need to work within any Tree Preservation Orders. A TPO is made under the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 and the Town and Country Planning (Trees) Regulations 1999. Typically made by the local planning authority (usually a local council), a TPO can protect either a specific tree or applied more broadly to protect trees within a specified area.

A TPO is most commonly used in urban and semi-urban settings and is aimed at protecting trees for the public's enjoyment. Generally a TPO takes into account the 'amenity' value of a tree or woodland and can include its nature conservation value or its visual 'impact'. If a tree is not visible or accessible from a public place a TPO will not usually be enforced.

On a golf course, you should never just assume everything is OK and you can treat trees as you like. A tree subject to a TPO should be listed in a way that its 'owner' or person responsible for its protection is aware of its status. But these issues can get forgotten, so it can pay to check. Hedges are not covered by TPOs, but as tree within a hedge may be.

TPOs are public documents and can be inspected at the local planning authority's office, or online.

It is best to cut back towards the trunk progressively in sections to reduce both the weight and volume of material falling. This will help protect the tree and prevent a long branch swinging back and clouting the operator.

For a clean cut at the trunk, larger branches should be undercut by a third before sawing through from the top. The aim is to produce a clean cut that allows the 'wound' to heal quickly and prevent disease entering the tree. As a guide, keep the cut close to the trunk but retaining enough branch bark at its base to grow over and heal the 'wound'.

Capacity wise, most pole pruners will tackle a 40cm diameter branch if the saw chain is sharp. That is not to say working up to this size is recommended but a good sharp chain can allow even a modest pruner to tackle quite a hefty branch.

As a rule, it is always better to prune lightly and leave a cleanly cut truncated large branch that can then be properly sawn off close to the trunk with a chainsaw. In most cases it is best to leave this to a trained arboriculturist, particularly on specimen trees.

Makes and models

Stihl and Husqvarna remain the key initial 'power tool' choice for many professional users; these two companies have the widest product offering and have strong dealer support pretty much throughout the country – although of course there are alternatives.

So what should you be looking for? Job one is to work out what you want the tool to achieve. For many a key job is to just take out the odd branch that catches when mowing.

A light pruner that can be carried on a mower at the beginning of the peak mowing season in spring could be just the tool for the job. Opt for a combi tool, and the head can be swapped to allow a line trimmer to be fitted to deal with the odd patch of difficult to reach grass too. A good option where one person would otherwise need to go back to fetch tools to finish the job after mowing.

Telescopic power pruners are pretty much the best option for most users as these tools have extra reach 'built in'.

A downside is that these pruners do not take kindly to rough handling, operators sometimes allowing the cutting head to drop to the ground when cutting and damaging the shaft. Unlike a brushcutter, the cutting element needs to



be sharpened and lubricated too. If a pruner needs to be 'forced' to cut, the shaft can get damaged, compromising the tools longevity.

With regards to power, a tool with greater capacity may get the job done faster but it may come with a weight penalty.

For occasional use this is less of an issue, but consider the type of harness on offer. A good harness can make heavier tools easier to move around and operate when not working to full reach.

There is tremendous choice when it comes to both dedicated power pruners and combination tools that can be fitted with a pruning head. The latter, such as the pictured Solo 109LG Combi system, is a versatile choice that will enable the power unit to be used for other jobs such as brushcutting