



A LITTLE OFF THE TOP

Scheduling tree pruning for winter months can cut expenses and enhance tree health. GCI walks you through the process to establish a pruning program.

BY ROB THOMAS

WITH WINTER WINDS ON the horizon, superintendents are quickly preparing their courses for the cold months ahead. Focusing solely on the turf, however, would be shortsighted. A proper tree pruning program can have far-reaching benefits - ensuring trees remain healthy and are ready for the foul weather ahead.

Tom DePaepe, ISA Certified Arborist with Ryan Lawn & Tree, looks at tree care from two sides - arboriculture and golf. "First, good pruning should minimize storm damage," he says. "This should help the golf superintendent reduce untimely expenses. He can schedule his pruning to winter months when play is down. Then it becomes a budget item he can prepare for.

"Second, raising trees on the course can benefit air movement, which will help the turf, plus may improve sight for golf play, and if done artistically, aesthetic benefits for members," he adds.

Dr. Bruce Fraedrich, vice president research, Bartlett Tree Experts, agrees with reducing the potential for storm damage through thinning or removing branches when the crown is dense, therefore reducing wind resistance. In addition, thinning improves light and air penetration into the canopy, which can reduce the severity of foliage diseases.

"Pruning can also provide benefits to surrounding plants and to people using the site," Fraedrich says. "For example, raising branch levels by removing low limbs can increase light penetration to the turf beneath the tree's canopy. Pruning can also provide clearance to buildings, security lights and pedestrian and vehicular traffic. For young trees, pruning is particularly important to establish a strong branch structure for future growth."

Add root pruning to the list of tree care that will ultimately benefit turfgrass health, lessening competition for vital nutrients, says Scott Johnson, a Board Certified Master Arborist and assistant district manager for Davey Tree Expert Co., Nashville.

As for knowing which ones to prune, Fraedrich suggests inspecting trees annually and after major storms. Look for dead, broken and cracked limbs as well as low branches that may interfere with play or may be excessively shading turf.

Larry Ryan, a graduate forester and president of Ryan Lawn & Tree, looks at the aesthetic importance, as well. "Removing visible, unsightly limbs makes any grounds appear to be manicured and kept up," he says. "Nothing says 'run down and struggling business' like something that appears poorly maintained."

Trees that are unhealthy, but not

targeted for removal, can still be pruned, but Fraedrich warns to tread cautiously. "Trees in poor health frequently have dead branches which should be removed," he says. "However, removing live branches from unhealthy trees should be avoided unless it is done for safety reasons. Removing live branches reduces the energy-producing area of the tree, which can result in further decline.

"Pruning also creates wounds, which makes the tree expend additional energy to close those wounds and defend against insect and disease attack," Fraedrich adds. "This is not an issue in healthy trees, but can be problematic for one that is in poor health."

DePaepe points to oak decline, in which case an arborist may spread the virus or disease via their tools to healthy trees, as a concern when pruning unhealthy trees. "A good arborist will sterilize tools after pruning a questionable tree with rubbing alcohol or diluted Clorox," he says. If you can afford to remove this tree, it is often cheaper to remove it in the early stages of decline versus pruning every few years, then removing the tree. Save that annual cost if the tree is on its way out."

But should the work be done in-house?

"Some superintendents have a good understanding of arboriculture. Most probably don't," Ryan says. "I know turfgrass for home lawns, but not for golf courses. We can't know everything."

A benefit of hiring a professional arborist is knowing the person pruning a tree is using proper technique.

"It doesn't take longer to prune a limb correctly than it does to prune incorrectly," DePaepe says. "Taking off the needed limbs to get a proper pruning job, but not more. Over pruning is tough on trees. A good arborist will realize not to remove a limb that is too large for the size of the tree. This can compromise the future structure of the tree."

For example, by removing a limb equal in size to a limb you leave in the lower section of the tree, you are often dealing with large trunk wood. This will create a very large wound. An alternative, if the limb has to be removed for structural reasons, is first cut the limb back by one-third this year. Next year, remove half of the remaining limb. A year or

two in the future, decide whether to remove the rest of the limb or again remove half of what remains. It creates less shock to the tree.

"A newer procedure good arborists are implementing is removing co-dominant leaders in trees. This can reduce future limb failure, big time," DePaepe says.

This is done with the same process described above. Again, reducing shock to the tree.



Most professional commercial arborists provide assessments and management programs as part of their maintenance services, Fraedrich says. The height of the golf season isn't a great time for a superintendent to schedule a major pruning project. The cycle of a tree happens to cooperate.

"Light pruning can be done any time of the year, but the dormant season is generally the best time to schedule pruning operations," Fraedrich says. "In late autumn and winter, the structure is more visible and pruning is easier since there are no leaves to deal with. Additionally, in northern areas, courses are usually closed and pruning in winter minimizes disruptions on the course."

Johnson, who worked for Crooked Stick Golf Club in Carmel, Ind., for 10 years and developed their tree-management program, suggests staying on top of the situation. "Think preventatively and actively manage trees instead of letting them

dictate when you work on them," he says. "An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure."

When Johnson first arrived at Crooked Stick, a tree would fail during the height of the golf season. The maintenance staff would have to slow down or stop what they were doing to fix the problem. As the tree-care program progressed, the staff better managed tree issues.

Scheduling can help with cost. "It has to fit into the superintendent's budget," Ryan says. "If he can work with a good tree company so they partner, both organizations can plan ahead to have the best people do the work, and get the superintendent excellent results at a fair price."

"Winter pruning is often discounted by tree companies to fill out their year and keep staff employed," he adds, noting there's less impact on the course working on frozen ground during the winter months in Midwestern and Northern climates."



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Realizing some southern courses might desire to do pruning mid-summer, when their play is lower, Ryan suggests picking the off season for your area of the country and working with a reputable tree company.

Still consider doing the work in-house? You'll need the right tools. "For safety, I'd recommend renting a bucket truck," Ryan says. "You don't want to try to teach your people to climb if they don't have the right gear and safety training. There is a reason pruning companies pay 15 percent workman's compensation insurance.

"Safety instructional videos from International Society of Arboriculture are good," he adds. "We'd also recommend all safety gear, from Kevlar chaps for people running chain saws on the ground to eye, ear and head protection. Don't cut corners on protection. We tell our arborists frequently, we never want to tell your spouse you won't be coming home tonight, so be safe every moment."

Think along the lines of safety and ask: "What can my crew safely do?"

Johnson suggests having a tree care expert train a couple of your employees. They can concentrate on pruning some of the smaller trees with minimal tools – such as a pole pruner and handsaw. For medium-sized and larger, more mature trees, recommends utilizing a professional service.

Cost is often an issue, so Fraedrich urges superintendents to consider all options before taking on this task. "While we recommend pruning be handled by a professional arborist, we do realize that budgets only go so far," he says. "With this in mind, if we can work with the course's crew we will. For example, there are times when we have handled the pruning and removals and the course employees have done the cleanup. This stretches the

budget and helps to keep course crews productive in winter."

Find an arborist who will work with your crew on cleanup to maximize the course's budget dollars. As for cost, pruning is often done on an hourly basis, but those rates can be misleading, according to Ryan.

"As an employee-owned company, our people are used to working quickly and efficiently and we have found we often get more work done per dollar spent than many companies do," he says. "A good superintendent might want to farm out a small portion of their work to several companies and watch the outcome of each company. Judge who gives you the best value. The results might be surprising."

A superintendent can actually earn some of the money back – selling logs to people looking for firewood or dealing the smaller logs to paper mills, Johnson says. Courses he works with will utilize wood chips to cover maintenance cart paths or for weed suppression in natural areas.

Still undecided about in-house pruning versus hiring a professional tree company? Ryan says to start small.

"Prune the shrubs, then small trees. Work your way up," he says. "Study, ask, read, continue to learn. If it was me and I was a superintendent competing with your course, I'd spend my time training my staff to wow my clients and hire the pruning [to be] done.

"My focus is to have so much play on my course, make it such a good experience, that I can afford to hire services like pruning," Ryan adds. "I would want to be the best golf course in the city. You can be the second best and do your own pruning." GCI

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