Pruning – Why, When and How

HOW

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Continued from January Issue

Deciduous Shrubs. Deciduous plants should be pruned using a thinning technique which preserves the natural shape. Prune out weakened, diseased and damaged portions first. Cut other branches back at varying lengths.

Always cut to an outfacing bud. This will cause the new branch to grow outward rather than into the center of the plant. Make the cut 1/4 inch above the bud. Pick off or cut off at a 45° angle the inward facing bud on plants with opposite buds to prevent a fork.

Evergreen Shrubs. Needle-type evergreen shrubs may be pruned using the same type thinning technique. Cut as close to the mainbranch as possible. Avoid severe pruning into older brown or dead areas, as these branches will not regenerate new growth. Long shoots of early growth should be tipped back to retain the desired shape.

Broadleaf evergreens are also pruned with a thinning technique. Holly trees should be pruned lightly every year or heavily every three years.

Shade Trees. The best time to alter shade trees, if needed, is when they are young. Establish alternate branching after the tree has been established for two or three years.

Choose well spaced branches; close branches on the same side of the tree will compete with neither developing into a desirable branch. Remove branches with narrow crotches as these are more likely to break under wind or snow loads. Prune so branches are emerging on a three dimensional perspective, don't prune so the tree has a "flat" appearance.

Pruning when the tree is without leaves allows you to better see the form and branching. It is usually more effective to start at the top and prune your way down. Do not remove the central leader in such tree as Platanus sp. (plane tree), Quercus (oak), Nyssa sylvatica (black gum) and Liquidambar styraciflua (sweet gum).

Large trees may need to be thinned to prevent property and personal injury. Do not de-horn trees. This practice not only ruins the form but weakens the plant. In addition to large wounds for disease and insect entrance, the resulting flush of "feathery growth" is weak and susceptible to storm damage.

A three cut method is recommended for larger limbs. The first cut is made eight to ten inches from the crotch or branch angle and on the underside of the limb. It should be 1/3 to 1/2 way through the limb. The second cut is made one to three inches further out from the first limb. As the limb falls, any bark rip, or break is stopped at the first cut. This prevents wounding and damage to other limbs or the trunk. Make the final cut through the branch collar. Support the stub to prevent bark wounds.

The wounded area should be smoothed with a knife to promote healing. At present there exists a controversy as to whether or not the apply wound dressing to the area. Shortle and Shigo (1978) recommend covering the wound with black plastic. Other references recommended at ree wound dressing, but without evidence to indicate efficacy. The procedure you follow is between you and your clientele. Many homeowners, however, may feel the job is incomplete unless they see wound dressing.

Damage to root systems of large shade trees may occur from construction and other disturbances. If severe root damage occurs, some thinning to the crown may be necessary to compensate. When thinning large branches, remove them at a crotch, do not leave stubs. The more severe the disturbance of the root system, the greater the need for thinning the crown.