

---

# Basic Tree Pruning

## Part 2: Pruning Conifer Trees



A four part introduction to care for your trees

**This booklet is brought to you by:**

**Scotty Tree & Arborist Limited**  
**Serving Victoria & Saanich Peninsula, BC**

**Scott Mitchell**  
**Phone: 250-665-PINE or cell: 250-220-9298**  
**Email: [scott@victoriatrees.com](mailto:scott@victoriatrees.com)**

# Basic Tree Pruning

## Part 2 Pruning Conifer Trees

Tree pruning is the removal of part of a tree in order to:

- Maintain the plant's natural shape
- Increase and maintain the general plant health
- Improve the quality of flowers and fruit
- Maintain the quality of the trunk and branches
- Obtain a bushier plant
- Limit the growth of fast-growing plants
- Achieve practical reasons (too much shade, too close to a house, etc.)

Part 1 Tree Identification and Tree Growth

**Part 2 Pruning Conifer Trees..... 1**

**What to remove when pruning ..... 2**

**Pruning conifer trees ..... 4**

Part 3: Pruning Deciduous Trees

Part 4: Tree Cutting Permits, Tools, Safety, and Pruning Cuts

Pruning is easy to do but done the wrong way can destroy a healthy tree and, spread disease. Pruning is more than cutting away parts of a tree. Some trees may have special pruning requirements so it is essential to identify the tree precisely.

Parts 1 to 4 should be read in that order as later topics assume you have read or have knowledge introduced in an earlier topic.

Enjoy learning about how to keep your trees healthy and looking good!

## What to remove when pruning

NOTE: It is assumed you know the species of tree and its unique pruning needs so as you consider the following you are not doing things that will damage the tree. These are general suggestions that apply in general to conifers and may not be appropriate for all conifer trees.

Often the need to prune a tree comes after a storm that breaks branches or from dead branches. Other times pruning is the desire to improve the health of a tree or for it to have a better visual appearance. Do not just start cutting away. Without a plan the results can be more work than anticipated, and can make its appearance look worse.

Walk around the tree both close up and further away. As you look at the tree make a note of branches that may require attention. Make a sketch or tie ribbons around branches to be pruned can help.

For many conifers, areas that may need attention include:

- Removal of dead or diseased branches.
- Branches that cross each other that may create future structural problems.
- Branches in need of thinning to reduce weight.
- Removal of lower branches to give clearance for buildings, cars, pedestrians, mowing around the tree, or allow light and air to reach ground cover.
- Problem branches that grow back toward the trunk or from the underside of the main branches. While these branches may not structurally harm the tree they do take away from the artistic line of the tree.
- Hazard branches that are now or will in the future cause it to touch buildings, power lines, fences, etc. **Safety first! Before you attempt work near power lines contact BC Hydro or other experts for advice.**

Generally do not remove branches from any weak area of the trunk. This will help promote growth in that area. However, if the weak area is due to disease, rot, or other damage then some pruning may be needed. On-site inspection by an expert to assess the health of the tree will be the best approach.

Some pruning techniques are best done by a professional. Consider giving Scotty Tree a call if the pruning is:

- More complex than you feel you can do properly.
- There is risk of doing severe damage to the tree.
- There is a risk of personal injury that you feel is better left to a professional.
- Some conifers may benefit from spiral removal. This may be important to do for a very tall tree, a tree that is not protected by other trees, or a tree with long branches on its upper portion so it catches the wind. In spiral removal every other branch from the top down is taken off to help keep the tree from breaking in a strong wind.

## Pruning conifer trees

Conifer trees have some pruning needs that are different than deciduous trees.

In conifers, new growth is from new wood and does not readily produce new shoots on old wood. A cut branch with no healthy terminal bud may stop growing.

Conifers can be grouped into two pruning types. Those that:

- Branch at random along the stem, e.g. cypresses and junipers. They have dormant buds all along their new shoots and can be cut anywhere.
- Have branches in whorls that radiate out like the spokes of a wheel from the trunk or limbs e.g. pines, cedars and firs. They have buds only where the whorls arise, that is at the tips or bases of new shoots. Cutting between the buds will result in the cut branch to die back and have no growth. Make cuts only to a lateral bud or to the bud cluster at the base of a year's growth (if it can be seen).
  - Do not cut into bare wood as dormant buds lose their viability and won't re-grow. But there are exceptions and why careful reading on the specific conifer species is necessary. The English yew, the plum pines among others will re-grow even if cut into bare wood.

Guidelines for formative pruning of a young conifer:

- Is likely not required unless there is obvious damage that needs repair.
- If pruned, do only enough to encourage bushy growth and maintain its natural shape especially with quick straggly growing species.
- If pruned at the end of its spring growth can result in a dwarfing effect. This may be desirable if the tree is growing in a location where it must not grow large such as near power lines or driveways.

Guidelines for maintenance pruning on a mature conifer:

- Can be done year-round on dead or diseased branches.
- Should be limited to new wood. Exceptions are the Canada yew and hemlock which will tolerate pruning of old wood on mature trees.
- Some pines can take heavy pruning but only at the ends of new branches. To make branches grow in a tight conical pattern once or twice a year cut the new growth, called candles, at an angle to remove one-third to one-half of any new growth. A machete, hand shears or hedge trimmers can be used.

- Pruning most conifers too heavily or frequently causes:
  - Most young and healthy trees to grow into a round or ball shape. This may be desirable but will require annual maintenance or it can return to growing in its normal shape.
  - An older tree to decline and die as many species such as the pines do not have living buds in old branches (exceptions are redwood and juniper). If a branch is cut too far back, the only correction may be to cut the entire branch off or to try cutting back to any living leafy branches and hope that there are adventitious buds that grow.
- Best to prune in late winter just before its spring growth. The spring growth will cover the newly pruned branches quickly.
- A mature tree unlike a young tree if pruned after early summer will:
  - Weaken as it will have fewer needles during its summer, fall and winter growth period and cannot produce the sugars it needs.
  - Give you many months of viewing unsightly leafless branches before slower new growth can cover them.
- Removing new shoots by about 1/3 to 1/2, if not overdone, may help:
  - Pines slow their growth and make it bushier.
  - Cedar, juniper and other scale-bearing conifers to emphasize their conical shape and make them bushier.
  - Spruce, fir, and other upright or pyramidal needle-bearing conifers to maintain a well defined leader or main stem.

