Basic Tree Pruning

Part 3: Pruning Deciduous Trees


A four part introduction to care for your trees

This booklet is brought to you by:

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Part 3 Pruning Deciduous 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.)

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 deciduous and may not be appropriate for all deciduous 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 trees, areas that may need attention include:

- Removal of dead or diseased branches.
- Duplicate branches, often as these branches grow they will compete with each other. Usually it may be better to cut out the weaker branch or remove the branch in the shadow of other branches as eventually it will have fewer leaves and stunted growth.
- Branches that cross each other that may create future structural problems.
- Branches growing from a V-shaped union. Branches that connect to a main branch in the form of a U-shape are stronger than branches having narrow angles of attachment or V-shaped. Consider how the tree might appear several seasons later if a branch is removed versus adding support to the branches to encourage the v-shape to grow into a U-shaped union.
- 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 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 deciduous trees may benefit from crown pruning (the highest part of the tree). This requires the use of a ladder, pole pruner, or climbing the tree to achieve:
    - Crown reduction to reduce the height of a tree.
    - Crown restoration on sides of crown to create a more natural shape.
    - Crown shaping to visually match the tree's environment.
    - Restore a view that the growth of a tree has eliminated.
- Pollarding; in the past, was done to produce new growth on a regular basis for a supply of new wood for fuel or fodder. The length of time between prunings depended upon the use of the cut material. Today pollarding is the practice of removing upper branches to promote a dense head of foliage and branches or to maintain trees at a predetermined height. This practice can stress some tree species enough to kill it, but other species including oaks, maples, willows and yews can tolerate this. Before considering pollarding do additional research to determine the risks to the trees. Some municipalities also have by-laws that restrict or prohibit pollarding.

Pruning deciduous trees

In addition to the list in the previous two pages here are some additional guidelines on pruning deciduous trees.

Regular lighter pruning instead of one-time heavy pruning helps to keep branches separated, and allows light to pass through to the other plants in your yard.

As deciduous trees produce new shoots from old wood:

- When the tree is first planted and for the first few years:
  Do formative pruning in late spring. A late spring pruning for a young tree helps wounds heal quickly. Spreading this initial pruning over several years is better than doing it all at one time as it puts less stress on the tree and gives you the opportunity to see where more pruning is needed. Formative pruning should be limited when possible to new growth. Leave a lateral bud close to the cut end to help insure the tree will continue growing.

- On older deciduous trees, including fruit trees:
  Do maintenance pruning when it is dormant (late fall to early spring), Avoid pruning when the sap flows too freely.
  - Remove no more than about 15% of the upper branches annually as this removes new growth buds and the leaves responsible for manufacturing the nutrients the tree requires for health and growth.
  - Remove any suckers growing at the base of the trunk.
  - Remove unwanted new shoots that may come from a dormant bud that became active due to a nearby injury.
  - Remove epicormic branches, these are branches that sprout vertically from the trunk or primary branches and competes with the main trunk. However if the main trunk is not healthy this is an opportunity for an epicormic branch to become the new main trunk by removing the main trunk instead.