

Midwinter Is Great Time to Prune Trees

Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service — Galveston County Office



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PHOTO CREDIT: William M. Johnson

When performed properly, pruning will help maintain the health and beauty of your trees. A stub cut (pictured) leaves too much of a dead branch on the tree which will decay backward into the trunk of the tree and could lead to death of the tree.

Virtually all trees in our landscapes will need to be pruned during their lives — particularly in the first two decades after planting. Sometimes a tree may need to be pruned in some way to help it, such as dealing with storm damage, reducing limb weight, removing dead limbs and

stopping the spread of disease.

Trees are also pruned to adapt them to our urban environment, including keeping limbs from coming in contact with power lines, rubbing against the home, hanging too low or obstructing views. Pruning may also be done to make

trees more attractive and useful in the home landscape.

When pruning, you must have a clear idea of what you are trying to accomplish. Ask yourself why you feel the tree needs to be pruned, and then carefully consider which branches need to be cut





to achieve your goal.

When evaluating your trees for pruning, try to anticipate potential problems. Look at where branches are and how they are growing. Then, imagine the years going by and how that branch will grow. Will it eventually cause problems?

It's best to remove branches when they are relatively small. When possible, avoid removing branches larger than 4 inches. Branches that size or larger create big wounds that will take a long time to heal. Anticipating issues and pruning early to correct them minimizes the need to remove large branches.

When pruning a tree, try to work with the tree's natural growth pattern. If a branch is too long or growing in the wrong direction, prune it back to a side branch growing in a more appropriate direction or remove it entirely. Don't cut it back to some arbitrary point just to get it out of the way. This will leave an unattractive stub that's difficult for the tree to heal. And a shortened branch will likely just re-sprout with even more undesirable growth.

If limbs are less than three-quarters of an inch in diameter, they can be removed easily with hand pruners. By-pass pruners (the blades cross like scissors) generally give a better cut than the anvil type (one blade forced against a flat surface). Larger branches should be cut with lop-

pers, a pruning saw or even a chainsaw.

When using a hand saw for pruning, you need the right kind of saw. Use a pruning saw designed for the job. Some have a slight curve in the blade, which aids the sawing action in tight spaces.

You must be especially careful to prune properly when pruning larger branches that grow out of the trunk. Some gardeners may still remember when it was recommended that branches should be cut flush with the tree's trunk. However, since the 1980s this has been discouraged. Research indicates that the wound will heal much faster and with less disease if the cut is made just to the outside of the branch collar.

The branch collar is a slightly swollen area at the base of the limb next to the trunk or at a limb junction. A naturally occurring protective chemical layer located there prevents rot.

Small branches may be removed with one cut. Make your cut just to the outside of the branch collar. If the branch collar is not apparent, find the bark ridge. Make your cut beginning at the outside top of the bark ridge and coming down at a 45-degree angle from the ridge. This will preserve the branch collar. Make a clean, smooth cut with a sharp saw. As you begin to complete the cut, hold the branch to support it until the cut is complete. This will prevent the branch

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from stripping away bark as it falls.

Larger size branches require three cuts. Contact the AgriLife Extension Office for more information on how to properly prune larger branches using the three-cut method.

The use of tree paints to seal the wound is not recommended. Research shows that such materials do not promote rapid healing or deter bacteria or fungi and may actually impede healing.

Trees can generally be pruned any time of the year. Mid-winter is the ideal season to prune deciduous trees while they are leafless and you can see the structure of the tree more clearly.

Upcoming Programs

Growing Great Tomatoes: 9:00 - 11:30 a.m., Saturday, January 18.

Growing Peaches in Galveston County: 1:00 - 3:30 p.m., Saturday, January 18.

All programs conducted at the Galveston County AgriLife Extension Office located at 4102-B Main Street (Carbide Park) in La Marque. No fee but pre-registration is requested (phone: 281-309-5065; e-mail: galvcountrymgs@gmail.com).

