

March - A Great Time For Tree Pruning

Late winter is an excellent time to prune deciduous or shade trees. Branches are easier to remove when not weighted down by leaves and the tree's branching structure is easy to see. Young trees that receive appropriate pruning in the first 5-10 years require little corrective pruning as they mature. However, don't prune specimen flowering trees now, such as Japanese lilac or magnolia. These trees should be pruned right after they finish blooming to prevent the removal of flower buds during pruning.

Pruning should be done with an understanding of how trees respond to each cut. Pruning cuts should be made so that only branch wood is removed and the trunk is not injured. If only branch wood is removed, the wound is smaller, the tree will be able to seal the wound more effectively, and the chance of problems with wood decay will be greatly reduced. Begin by removing dead, broken or diseased branches, and crowded or rubbing limbs. Also remove suckers and watersprouts.

To locate the proper place to make a pruning cut, first look for the "branch bark ridge" on the upper surface of the branch where it joins the trunk. This is a line of bark that is pushed up between the branch and trunk as they have grown. (Some branch unions will not have this if they did not form properly. Instead the branch will simply press into the supporting stem, forming a sharp V-shaped union.) On the underside of the branch look also for the "branch collar", which is a slightly swollen area of trunk tissue that wraps around the base of the branch. A proper pruning cut begins just outside the branch bark ridge and angles down and slightly away from the trunk, avoiding injury to the branch collar.

Branches should be pruned using a series of three cuts. The first cut is to the underside of the branch, approximately 8-10 inches from the tree's trunk, and goes less than half way through the branch. The first cut does not remove any of the branch; its purpose is to prevent the bark from ripping down the side of the tree when the branch falls. The second cut is made an inch or two further out from the first cut, away from the tree trunk, and removes the majority of the branch. The second cut should be made from the top side of the branch down. The final cut removes the remaining stump, also going from the top of the branch down, being careful not to cut into either the branch bark ridge or the branch collar.

Establish a strong scaffold branch structure by choosing permanent branches that are spaced alternate up the trunk of the tree, and evenly around the circumference of the trunk. Branches forming wide angles with the trunk have greater strength than those that form narrow angles with the trunk. Good pruning techniques remove structurally weak branches while maintaining the natural form of the tree. For most young trees, maintain a single, dominant trunk leader.

Next week- Pruning Don'ts.