

# Pruning Landscape Trees

Pruning trees often seems a bit confusing to many of us. While pruning may be considered an art form to some, confusion is easily dispelled with a little knowledge of trees and a few rules.

## **“YOU CAN’T KEEP A GOOD TREE DOWN...”**

Remember, like people, trees have genetic codes that make them grow in different forms and shapes. Do not try to impose an unnatural form on a tree, unless you are ready to make a long-term maintenance commitment. If you have a narrow planting site, for example, choose a tree species that has an upright, columnar form instead of one that will spread its branches and eventually take over your, and both neighbors, back yards!

A good way to study a tree’s structure and individual shape is to observe them during the winter.

The Post Falls Street Tree list is one resource that can help you find the best tree to fit your needs and grow within the parameters of your site. It lists the height and spread of over 50 trees that will grow in our area. Call the Urban Forestry Department for a copy or look on the City’s web site.

## **THE TOOLS**

It is important to use the correct tools for the job. Most homeowners can get by using two good pruning tools, a bypass pruner and a pruning saw. By-pass pruners have a curved blade that work like a scissors. Try to avoid anvil-type pruners which have a straight blade that cuts against a flat surface. By-pass pruners do not crush plant tissue to the extent that anvil pruners do.

A pruning saw should be used when a branch is one inch in diameter or larger. Pruning saws have narrow blades and teeth that cut on the pull stroke. A folding pruning saw is easy to carry. Saws with a “tri-cut” type of blade make narrow, clean cuts.

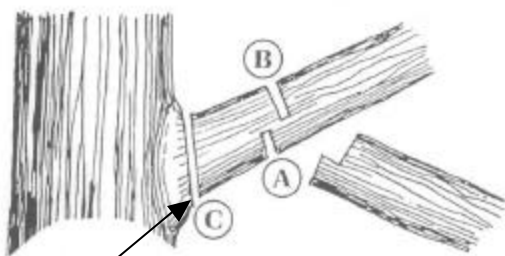
Avoid using loppers. They are great for those hard to reach places, but if you need a bigger tool than a hand pruner to do the job use a pruning saw. Twisting and wrenching pruners and loppers while trying to cut through larger branches not only puts undo stress on your tools, but you are more likely to cause bark damage to your trees.

## THE RULES

Use the “three D’s plus C” rule to start pruning. Prune **DEAD, DAMAGED, DISEASED and CROSSING** and/or rubbing branches. After that, prune to encourage natural form and growth habits using the following guidelines.

**REMEMBER:** Never remove more than  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the leaf surface of a tree per year. If more work is necessary, do it over several years.

- ✂ ✂ When shortening branches, prune limbs back to a lateral limb that is at least  $\frac{1}{3}$  its diameter.
- ✂ ✂ **DO NOT “top” trees!** Topping is the indiscriminant cutting of large diameter branches to reduce the height of a tree. If it does not kill the tree, topping results in the rapid re-growth of poorly attached sprouts. The large cuts left after topping are difficult for a tree to seal, making the branch vulnerable to insect and disease invasion.
- ✂ ✂  $\frac{2}{3}$  of the lower branches should hold  $\frac{1}{2}$  of the tree’s foliage.
- ✂ ✂ Maintain limbs that have good attachment angles (branches should grow at angles approximating the 10:00 or 2:00 position on a clock – or about a 45-degree angle).
- ✂ ✂ In young trees, leave the lower limbs to encourage strong trunks. If limbs are over  $\frac{1}{2}$  the diameter of the tree, cut them back some then plan to remove them in the next couple of years.
- ✂ ✂ Ideally, branches should be evenly distributed along the trunk at about 12-inch intervals.
- ✂ ✂ Wounds will seal more quickly if you prune by **cutting just outside of the branch bark ridge**, the slightly swollen area where the branch attaches to the trunk. **DO NOT** cut flush with the trunk of the tree, the resulting wound will be very slow to seal. Cut only the dead stub on dead branches. **DO NOT** cut the live collar.
- ✂ ✂ To avoid tearing or stripping bark on the underside of limbs, use the **three-step method** of pruning to remove limbs over 2 inches in diameter. (see diagram)



Branch bark ridge

**ONE:** First Cut - Cut up from the bottom and part way through the branch one to two feet away from the trunk. (A)

**TWO:** Second Cut – cut on the top of the branch on the other side of the first cut. (B)

**THREE:** Third Cut – The final cut is made just outside of the branch bark ridge to remove the remaining stub. (C)

✍ ✍ **DO NOT** apply wound dressing to pruning cuts. At best, it is only aesthetic. Dressings can damage the tree's own ability to seal a wound, increasing the chance of decay.

## **WHEN?**

An experienced arborist once told me, "The best time to prune is when the saw is sharp!" With a few exceptions, I agree with him. You should avoid pruning when leaf buds are swelling and breaking or when the tree is "shutting down" for the winter. Trees expend a tremendous amount of energy during these periods of time and cuts do not heal as quickly.

## **MORE INFO:**

If pruning still seems confusing to you, consider taking a pruning class. Post Falls Urban Forestry Department will be offering pruning workshops this spring. Watch the paper for an announcement or call Linden at 773-8147 for more information.

If you have internet access, the following sites have great pruning information.

**The International Society of Arboriculture**

<http://www2.champaign.isa-arbor.com/consumer/consumer.html>

**The US Forest Service St. Paul Field Office**

[http://www.na.fs.fed.us/spfo/pubs/howtos/ht\\_prune/prun001.htm](http://www.na.fs.fed.us/spfo/pubs/howtos/ht_prune/prun001.htm)

**The University of Georgia Extension Service**

<http://www.ces.uga.edu/pubcd/C628-w.htm>