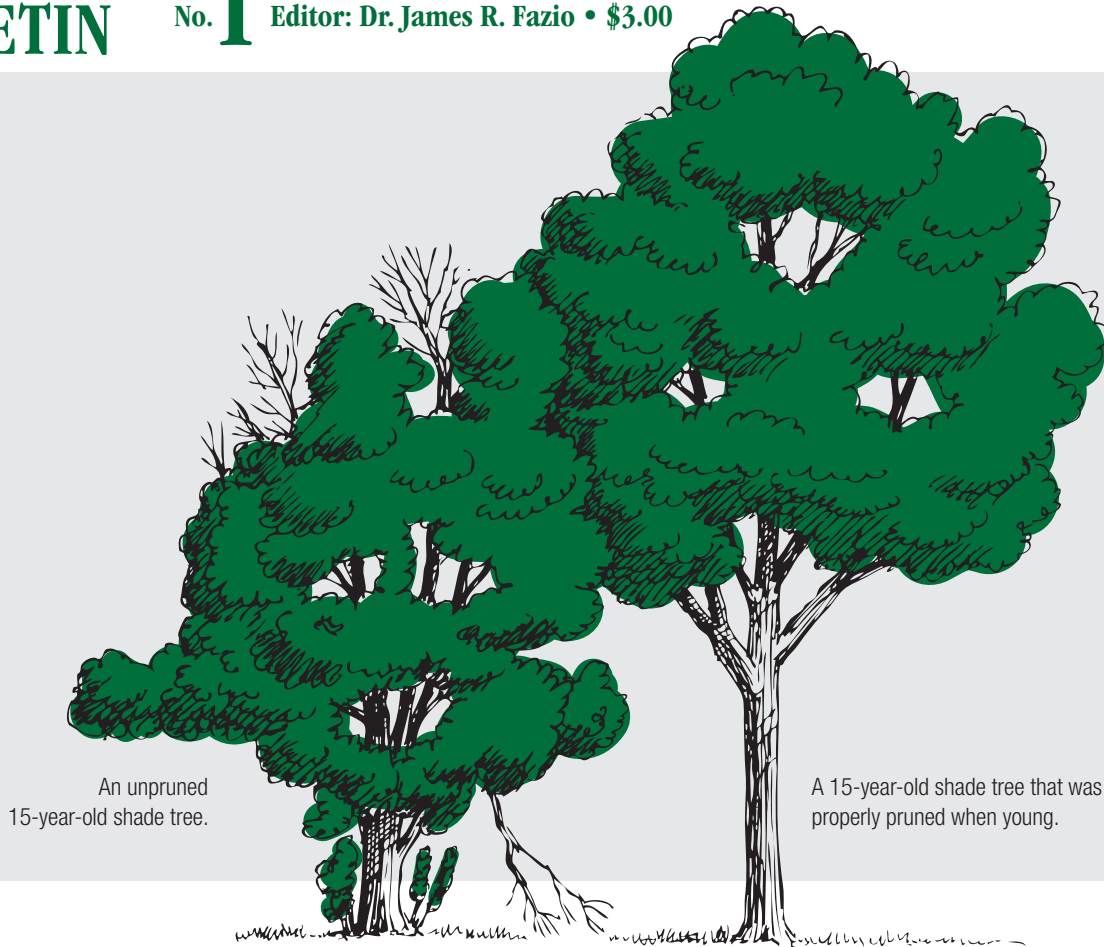




# How to Prune Young Shade Trees

TREE CITY USA®  
BULLETIN

No. **1** Editor: Dr. James R. Fazio • \$3.00



An unpruned  
15-year-old shade tree.

A 15-year-old shade tree that was  
properly pruned when young.

**“A**s the twig is bent, so grows the tree.” This insightful old bromide about children might just as well serve as the cardinal principle for pruning young shade trees. What you do to your tree in its first few years of life will affect its shade, strength, and even its life span. In importance, early pruning must rank just after selecting the right tree for the site and careful planting.

The sketch of the tree on the right represents what we like shade trees to look like 15 years or so after planting: a tall, straight trunk and a full, healthy crown with strong, well-spaced branches ... a tree that casts a broad expanse of sheltering shade, that resists damage by wind and ice, that is easy to maintain.

The sketch at the left also represents a 15-year-old tree. But it looks more like a big, rambling bush than a well-groomed shade tree. Its low-growing branches obscure streets, driveways, and walks, posing traffic hazards. Many branches have been damaged during storms, and weak, unsightly shoots sprout in abundance. Maintenance is badly needed and will now be expensive.

What made the difference?

The tree at the right was properly pruned when it was young. The tree at the left was neglected.

This bulletin explains how pruning young shade trees is a simple, straight-forward task. It is a job that needs to be done, whether by you for the trees in your yard or by your community for the trees on public property. In any case, proper pruning will save money in the long run and give you safer, more beautiful, healthy, easy-to-maintain trees.



**Arbor Day Foundation®**  
100 Arbor Avenue • Nebraska City, NE 68410

# A Tale of Two Trees

One happy day in May the all-American dream came true for two families. Brand new houses of their own in the suburbs. The good life for their kids. New friends and neighbors. More space and comfort. And good investments, too.

Now, it happened that both families loved trees, so they each promptly planted one to commemorate their

new starts in life. Unknown to each other, both families planted trees that were the same species and the same age.

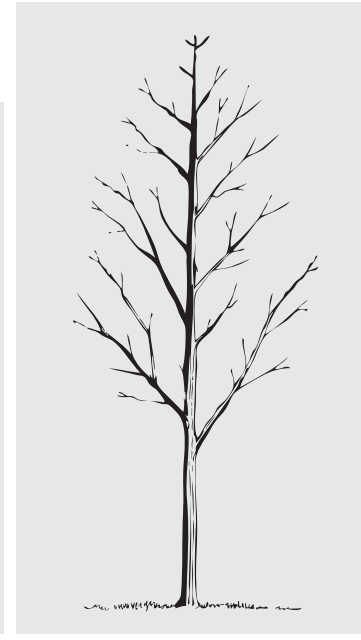
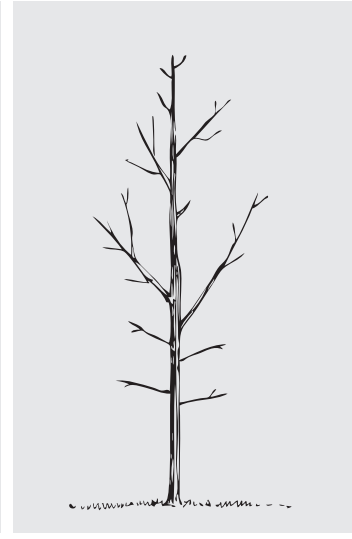
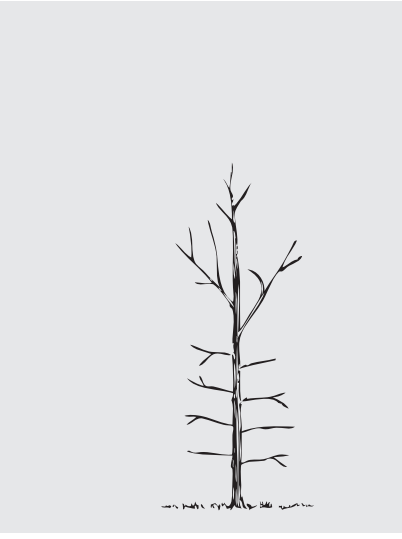
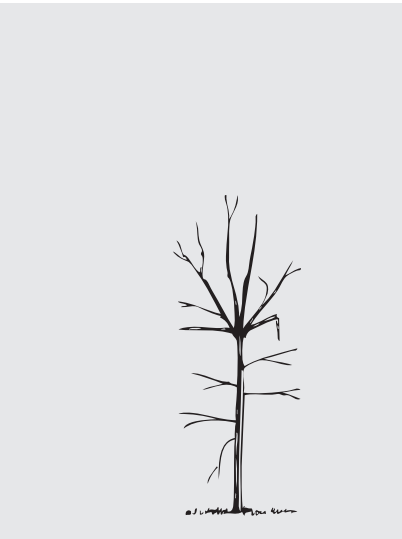
Looking ahead, we would expect the twin trees to eventually make a nice contribution to the neighborhood, each spreading its shade to grateful residents for generations to come. But, it was not to be. Unfortunately, Family A had the misguided belief that a tree should be

left alone, just as it is in the forest. Family B knew better. They realized that a tree in the yard or along a street is not growing there because ecological sorting matched its needs to the site. It is there because it was planted there; nature's method was circumvented.

The new transplant is probably on poor soil that is then subjected to the trampling of hundreds of footsteps. It most likely is not enjoying the optimum conditions of sunlight or shade, and it certainly does not have the advantage of forest neighbors to shield it from wind, prune its lower branches, and form the outline of its crown. In short, it needs help.

## FAMILY A'S TREE — NOT PRUNED WHEN YOUNG

## FAMILY B'S TREE — PRUNED WHEN YOUNG



### AT PLANTING

Family A didn't ask for planting instructions. They knew how to plant a tree. When that was done, they believed their work was done.

Actually, they were partly correct. You may receive instructions to the contrary, but little should be done to the tree at this stage. In most cases, it is best to leave all the leaf surface possible to manufacture food that will build a larger root system. It has been found that both roots and top will be larger after one year if left unpruned.

### AFTER 3-4 YEARS

By the time many transplants are in their new homes for two to four growing seasons, sprouts and suckers may appear. The root suckers protruding near the base sap strength from the tree. The sprouts are disproportionately vigorous and weakly attached to the tree. And look at the broken limb. By now, it has sprouted numerous branches just below the break — too many, in fact.

### AFTER 5-7 YEARS

The baby is quickly becoming an adult. The results of not making corrections early in life are now quite visible, although some are still not obvious to the untrained eye. To the more careful observer, the form of the future crown is apparent.

### 15 YEARS AFTER PLANTING

Family A's tree is now not only unattractive, but dangerous, especially when the wind is blowing. Lopsided and dense, the tree in full leaf catches the wind like a sail. Also, the narrow branch angles and multiple leaders have resulted in a weak top. The broken branch not only attracted insects, but may soon break off under the weight of too many sprouts. Decay has entered the trunk where the little bent branch tore off many years ago and a jagged stub protrudes just above it. The tree is an accident waiting to happen. It is becoming more of a liability than an asset for the property.

### AT PLANTING

Family B also planted their tree correctly, but they also noticed a broken branch and a branch that was competing with the leader. Both were pruned close to the trunk. Another, swollen from the sting of an insect laying eggs (a gall), was snipped off. Otherwise, all branches were left intact to provide maximum leaf surface to manufacture food during the first year of life in its new home.

### AFTER 3-4 YEARS

Root growth should be well on its way to anchoring the transplant and expanding to the size necessary to nourish the growing branches. Family B decides to cut off the root suckers and sprouts in the crown. Excessive branches are thinned to reduce competition for light, water, and nutrients, and a codominant leader is removed. A few of the lowest limbs are also removed, but others are temporarily left to help the trunk develop more taper and strength. Growth is far enough along to reveal branches that rub or are growing in an undesirable direction. Narrow angles are also eliminated for reasons explained on page 4.

### AFTER 5-7 YEARS

Lower limbs are pruned off to "raise" the bottom of the crown well out of the way of human heads. The lowest limbs are now permanent. An important fact is recognized here. Branches do not move upward as a tree grows taller. The center of a branch at 5 feet will always be at 5 feet. Higher up, a few overzealous branches are cut back so they do not protrude beyond the outline of the crown. A branch here or there is removed for more even spacing, but basically the job of sculpturing the tree is now complete.

### 15 YEARS AFTER PLANTING

Family B was amazed to see their tree survive a major windstorm one summer day. While many other trees in the neighborhood suffered split tops and broken limbs, theirs stood strong and firm. Proper pruning gave strength to the branches and allowed to the wind to pass harmlessly through the thinned crown. Early each spring, the tree gets scrutinized and dead or damaged limbs are cut off using proper pruning methods. Otherwise, Family B has only to enjoy their tree. And what do you know? Just before they moved recently, the realtor told them it was their trees that helped sell the property so quickly.

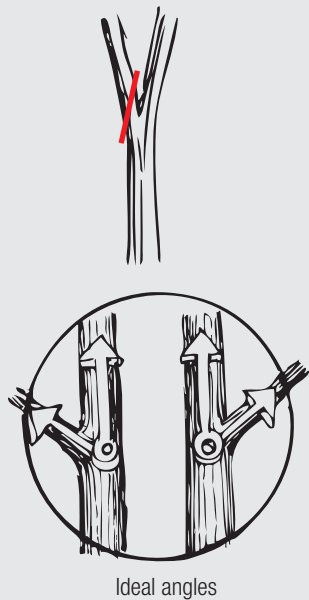
# Pruning for Strength

The first guide to pruning a young shade tree is to have a clear understanding about what pruning can do for the tree — and you.

For example, we know to prune modestly — if at all — when transplanting a new tree. An immediate objective must be to strengthen and expand the root system which is often reduced by 80-90 percent during transplanting. To meet this objective, as much as possible of the leaf surface (the tree's food factory) is left intact. Only damaged or dead limbs should be removed.

## BRANCH ANGLES AND SIZE

Narrow angles signal a point of future weakness, whether in the trunk or crown. As the two branches grow, neither has sufficient space to add the wood needed for strength. Instead, they grow against each other. The effect is similar to hammering in a wedge. To prevent this and the expensive problems that are sure to follow, simply remove one of the two branches. For strength, the ideal branching angle approximates 10 or 2 o'clock.



Lateral branches should be no more than one-half to three-fourths the diameter of the trunk. As the trunk grows, it will strengthen the joint by adding wood around the branch — like a dowel in a chair leg.

## CENTER OF GRAVITY

Young trees deformed by wind may be corrected by pruning. Move the tree's center of gravity to a point more central over the trunk by cutting back the leader and laterals on the downwind side (or direction of lean) to more upright branches.

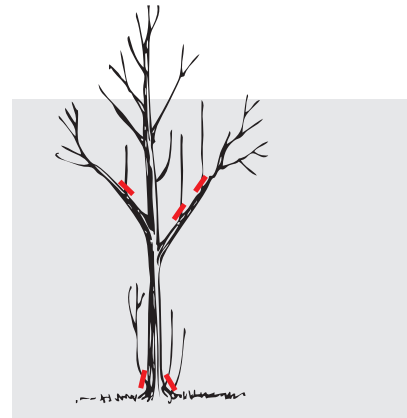
**Caution:** When pruning diseased trees, dip your shears in household bleach before storing or moving to the next tree. Be sure to rinse and wipe dry before storage.

After the first year, pruning should begin in earnest. Pruning with strength as the objective is the best way to avoid weak branches later on and to prevent expensive corrections that will otherwise become necessary.

What to look for:

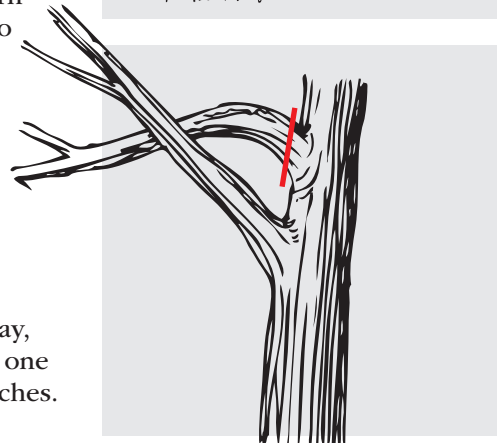
## WATERSPROUTS AND SUCKERS

These "parasite" sprouts can occur at the base or inside the crown. They are rapidly growing, weakly attached, and upright. Usually they use more energy than they return to the tree. It is best to remove them as soon as possible when it is obvious they are vigorous sprouts.



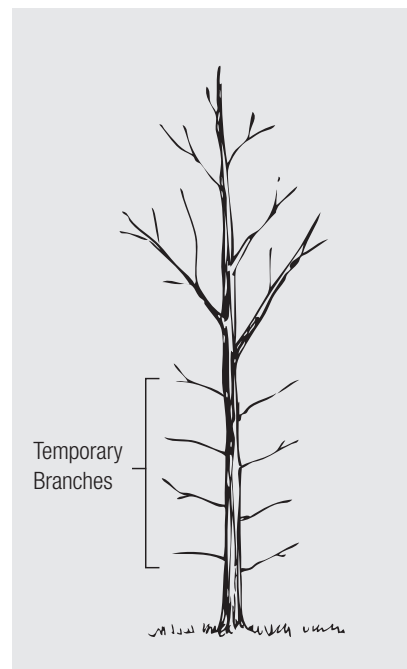
## RUBBING BRANCHES

Branches that rub result in wounds, decay, and notches. Remove one of the offending branches.



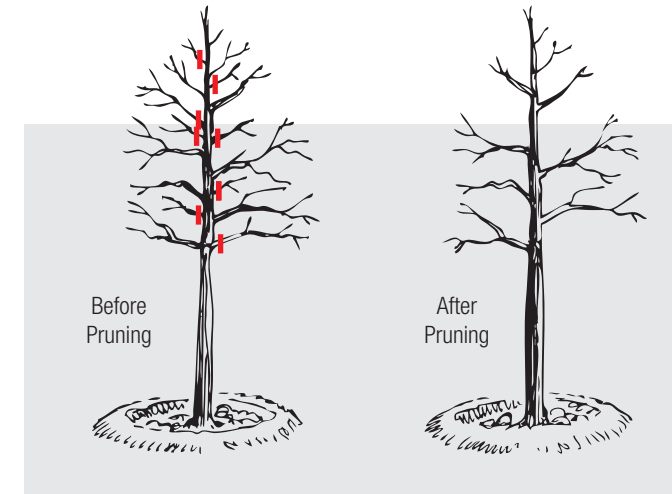
## TEMPORARY BRANCHES

Branches below the lowest permanent branch can protect young bark from injury from the sun and add taper and strength to the trunk. Particularly in lawn plantings where lower limbs do not block passage or tempt vandals, the limbs may be left for three to four years after planting. Then remove over the next two to three years, beginning with the larger temporaries. Don't let the temporary branches become large and vigorous.



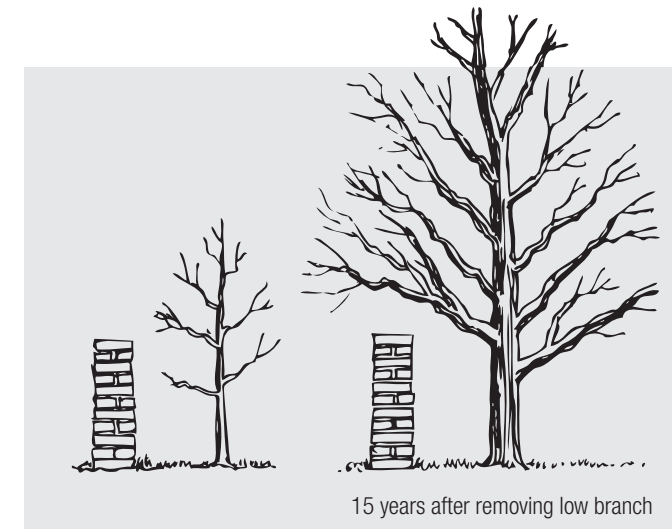
# Pruning for Form

The objective in pruning for form is to help shape a tree that is aesthetically pleasing and serves well in the space it is to occupy. After pruning with strength in mind, look for ways to help shape the most desirable tree.



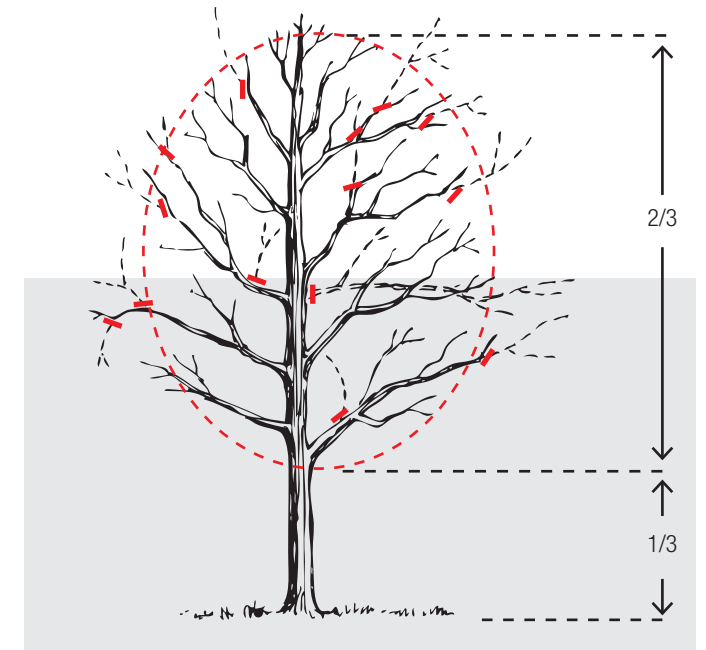
## THINNING AND SPACING

Most trees benefit from thinning — removing a portion of the limbs that compete for space and light. Evenly spaced laterals, 8-12 inches apart in the young tree, is a good rule of thumb to help ensure an ideal "ladder" at maturity. Of course, this will vary by species.



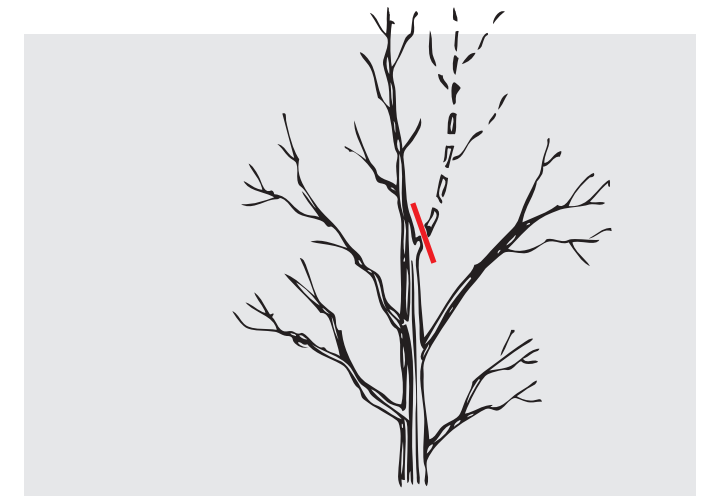
## FUNCTION

Try to imagine what the tree will look like when it is larger. If a limb is headed toward trouble (the house, walkway, sign, etc.), remove as early as possible in the life of the tree. Closure of the wound will be more complete when the limb is small, and it is less trouble and expense. Remember, limbs do not move upward as a tree grows in height.



## INGROWERS, PROTRUDERS, AND CROWN RATIO

When a crown is dense, look for limbs that turn inward, and those that extend beyond the natural outline of the crown. Prune at the trunk or down to an appropriate lateral branch. Overpruning can damage or even kill your tree. Always maintain at least three-fourths of the tree as the live crown.



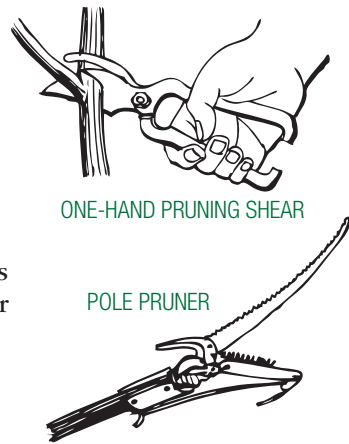
## DOUBLE LEADERS

Protect the leader from competition. In trees with co-dominant leaders, remove the one with a crook or other defects, or that creates a lopsided appearance.

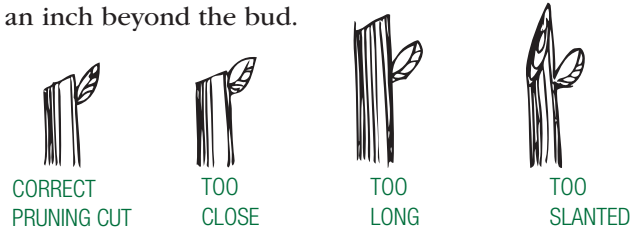
**Caution:** Do not prune too high too quickly. To lift the crown, remove lower limbs throughout several years. No more than 25 percent of the live crown should ever be removed in an annual growing season.



1. Prune early in the life of the tree so pruning wounds are small and so growth goes where you want it.
2. Begin your visual inspection at the top of the tree and work downward.
3. Identify the best leader and lateral branches (scaffold limbs) before you begin pruning and remove defective parts before pruning for form.
4. Don't worry about protecting pruning cuts. For aesthetics, you may feel better painting larger wounds with a neutral-color tree paint, but the evidence is that it does not prevent or reduce decay.
5. Keep your tools sharp. One-hand pruning shears with curved blades (secateurs) work best on young trees.
6. Make safety the No. 1 priority. For high branches use a pole pruner. A major job on a big tree should be done by a professional arborist.



7. When you prune back to the trunk or a larger limb, branches too small to have formed a collar (swollen area at base) should be cut close. (Notice in the drawing of the pruning shears that the cutting blade is cutting upward for less effort and a close cut.) Otherwise, follow the rules of good pruning of larger limbs by cutting just outside the branch ridge and collar and at a slight down-and-outward angle (so as not to injure the collar). Do not leave a protruding stub.
8. When simply shortening a small branch, make the cut at a lateral bud or another lateral branch (referred to as "head" or "headback pruning"). Favor a bud that will produce a branch that will grow in a desired direction (usually outward). The cut should be sharp and clean and made at a slight angle about one-fourth of an inch beyond the bud.



## WHEN TO PRUNE

*This depends to a large extent on why you prune. Light pruning and the removal of dead wood can be done anytime. Otherwise, here are some guidelines, but recognize that individual species may differ.*

**WINTER** Pruning during dormancy is the most common practice. It results in a vigorous burst of new growth in the spring and should be used if that is the desired effect. It is usually best to wait until the coldest part of winter has passed. Some species, such as maple, walnuts, and birches, may "bleed" when the sap begins to flow. This is not harmful and will cease when the tree leafs out.

**SUMMER** To direct the growth by slowing the branches you don't want or to slow or "dwarf" the development of a tree or branch, pruning should be done soon after seasonal growth is complete. The reason for the slowing effect is that you reduce the total leaf surface, thereby reducing the amount of food manufactured and sent to the roots for their development and next year's growth of the crown.

Another reason to prune in the summer is for corrective purposes. Defective limbs can be seen more easily, as well as limbs that hang down too far under the weight of leaves.

**FALL** Because decay fungi spread their spores profusely in the fall and healing of wounds seems to be slower on fall cuts, this is a good time to leave your pruning tools in storage.

**FLOWERING TREES** If your purpose for pruning is to enhance flowering:

1. For trees or shrubs that bloom in summer or fall on *current* year's growth (e.g., crapemyrtle), prune in winter.
2. For trees that bloom in spring from buds on year-old wood (e.g., dogwood and flowering fruit trees), prune when their flowers fade.

**Caution:** In some areas of the country, diseases or insect occurrence may be affected by the time of pruning. Check with your county extension agent, city forester, an arborist, or a nursery operator to see if there are any local problems.



A survey conducted by American Forests showed that many of the nation's urban forests are in serious trouble. To stem the decline of shade trees, more and more communities are engaging in vigorous planting programs. The magnitude of this effort may vary from a few dozen park trees in small towns to the annual planting of thousands of trees in large cities. In all cases, the investment is significant. American Forests suggests that 20 percent of an urban forestry budget should be directed at planting and early care. It follows that the early care of new trees is one of a community's best ways to maximize its investment in planting. Systematic pruning of trees during the first several years of growth should be an integral part of the program.

A basic mission of the Tree City USA program is to encourage ongoing shade tree care. Early pruning is part of the care necessary for strong, healthy, beautiful trees. Of the four standards shown on the back page of this bulletin, time spent pruning young trees would contribute to Standard 3 as a portion of the comprehensive community forestry program. Within a tree maintenance program, urban foresters and arborists have suggested that the following steps be included:

1. Minimum pruning immediately after transplanting; within three years, pruning for strength and form; and every three years thereafter, pruning to lift the canopy of street trees (usually to 8 feet above sidewalks and 14 feet above residential streets).
2. Providing initial training and annual refresher training for crews doing the pruning.  
*Caution:* Crews that regularly prune older trees tend to overprune young trees.
3. Stressing tool sharpness and, if necessary, disinfective methods.
4. Developing an inventory that is kept up to date with all maintenance operations, and future needs being noted, including pruning.
5. Monitor annually and prune on a five- to eight-year cycle.

## FOR THE BEST START, START IN THE NURSERY

A good tree management program begins with selecting good trees. When choosing trees for city plantings along streets and in parks and other public places, you will want trees with a fairly substantial caliper even if they are initially more expensive. Some things to look for:

**BARE-ROOT TREE:** Abundant root growth, fibrous and numerous small roots, good color, moist.

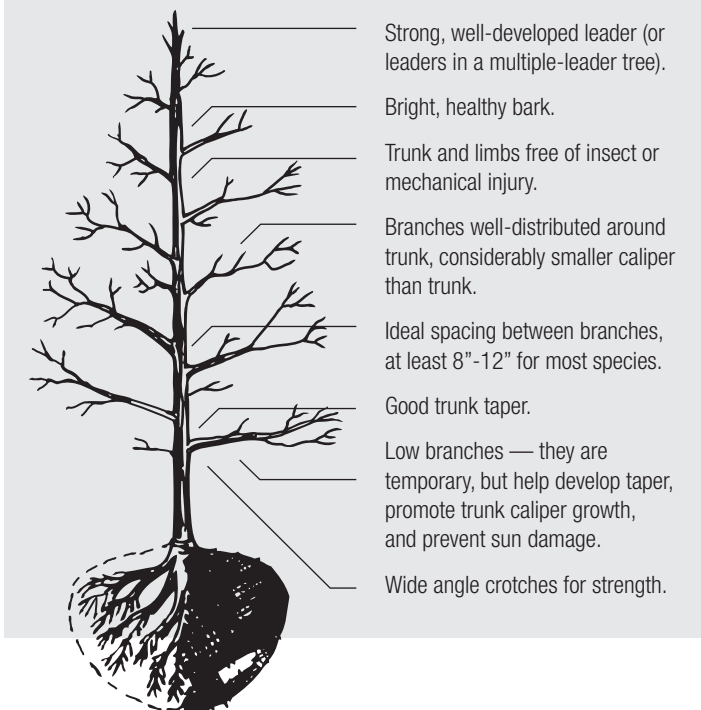
**BALLED & BURLAPPED TREE:** Firm soil ball with trunk securely tied. Do not accept a plant with a broken ball. Do not accept a tree with a circling root at the base of the trunk. Always carry B&B plants by the soil ball, not by the trunk, stems, or branches.

**CONTAINER-GROWN TREE:** Avoid trees that are root-bound in the can. Roots that circle around the edge of the container may become circling roots. Always remove can, basket, or pot when planting. (Cut any circling roots when planting.)

For some street planting, such as next to narrow sidewalks, it may be necessary to plant trees that immediately have high crowns. In this case, the height of the lowest limbs should be specified when ordering from the nursery. However, whether raising the crown during the years after planting, or as the trees are grown in the nursery, it is generally important to maintain a ratio of two-thirds green top to one-third pruned trunk.

Tree boards should be wary buyers. Carefully write specifications and be sure an expert inspects the trees before accepting delivery on behalf of the city. After a good start with good nursery stock, remember — a program of pruning young trees is a wise, long-term investment.

*NOTE: Establishing a systematic pruning program qualifies for eight of ten points needed to receive a Tree City USA Growth Award. Holding a tree-care workshop or publicizing the need to prune young trees — the right way — also qualifies for points. Contact the Arbor Day Foundation for a Growth Award application and complete list of qualifying activities.*



# For More Information

On the subject of pruning young shade trees, useful information is often scattered throughout books and literature on broader topics, such as general tree care or pruning in general. Cooperative Extension in most states also has leaflets on pruning, although most tend to focus on fruit trees or the care of mature shade trees. For a list of some of the more helpful books and other references, please visit [arborday.org/bulletins](http://arborday.org/bulletins).

Homeowners can obtain advice on pruning young shade trees from their county extension agent, local arborist, or city forester. Communities can obtain assistance in designing pruning and other community forestry programs from their state forester's office.



## SO SIMPLE, YET SO IGNORED

The wisdom of pruning young trees is often ignored, possibly because it is difficult to think ahead and envision what a tree will look like in the coming years. But pruning when the tree is small is well worth the effort. Here is what some professionals say about the need for more attention to pruning young trees:

*You don't want double leaders on your tree ... If it's a young tree, you can cut out one of these leaders. If it's an old tree and it would ruin its good looks to take out one leader, you could hire a qualified arborist to cable the leaders together if they pose a threat to life or property.*

— THE LATE CASS TURNBULL  
*The Complete Guide to Landscape Design,  
Renovation, and Maintenance*

*Just a few minutes with hand shears could solve a lot of problems later on.*

— TOM WIENS, CERTIFIED ARBORIST

*Arborists could do a great service and gain customers by going through new neighborhoods and pruning young trees.*

— THE LATE ALEX SHIGO, TREE EXPERT AND AUTHOR

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- Standard 1: A tree board or department
- Standard 2: A tree care ordinance
- Standard 3: A community forestry program with an annual budget of at least \$2 per capita
- Standard 4: An Arbor Day observance and proclamation

Each recognized community receives a Tree City USA flag, plaque, and community entrance signs. Towns and cities of every size can qualify. Tree City USA application forms are available from your state forester, the Arbor Day Foundation at [arborday.org/treecity](http://arborday.org/treecity), or your state forestry agency.

## PRUNING OR TRIMMING?

Despite common useage of the word “trimming,” pruning is the better term to use when referring to removing limbs from trees. Pruning is the careful and intentional removal of selected limbs; trimming implies indiscriminate removal or shearing to produce a certain shape — best reserved for hedges and mustaches!