



Pest Corner

January, 2006

Pruning Young Ornamental Trees

Judicious pruning of young ornamental trees during their first few years will develop a strong framework of well-placed branches. Since pruning young ornamentals reduces their overall growth, remove only enough to direct growth and correct any structural weaknesses. It's better to take corrective measures now than when the plant is more established. Large pruning cuts take years for the wound to heal, so plan regular and early pruning when the trees are young and branch diameter is small. This reduces the cut surface area and potential for decay.

A tree's growth habit and its landscape dictate the extent and approach you take to get the desired form. Trees with a strong central leader and a conical shape, like most conifers and some broadleaves such as liquidambar (sweetgum), may need little or no pruning. On the other hand, trees with irregular growth habits, poor branch structure, or vigorous laterals, may need annual pruning in their early years. Most oaks, maples, and ash trees fall into this category.

Trees with spreading growth habits should eventually have 5 to 7 main branches spaced 12 to 24 inches apart up and down the trunk. It's best if they are spaced evenly around the trunk so they don't shade one another. The first permanent branch can be a few inches to as much as 12 feet above the ground, depending on the tree's use. When given a choice, keep vigorous branches that have the widest angle of attachment between the branch and the trunk. Branches with narrow, V-shaped crotches are usually weaker and may break off as they get older.

Leave small branches along the trunk for the first 2 to 3 years while the tree gets established. They help shade the bark and produce food that strengthens the tree. If you want the first permanent branch to start above the current height of the tree, remove or shorten vigorous side branches until the trunk is tall enough that you can begin to select the permanent branches. For a tall upright trunk, keep the leader dominant. If any side branches begin to grow too fast or begin to compete with the leader for dominance, prune them back.

Where to cut: Cut the limb you are removing just outside the branch bark ridge without cutting into the ridge. The branch bark ridge is the wrinkled bark line that forms between the branch and the trunk. It is easier to see on some species than others. On conifers,

the branch bark ridge encircles the branch (collar-like) while on hardwoods, it drapes over and down the sides of the branch junction like a droopy mustache. Cutting on the inside between the main trunk and the ridge or into the ridge itself, partially destroys the ability of the wound to heal over rapidly and decay will result. It is better to error by slightly making the cut too far into the limb you are removing than cutting into the bark ridge, branch or trunk you are leaving.

What to cut: You can and should remove dead, damaged and diseased branches on any tree or shrub at any time of the year. Branches less than one inch in diameter can usually be removed if they are crossing, growing inward or causing a hazard. Everything else takes some thought. Vines, cane bearing shrubs and mounding shrubs can be pruned somewhat heavily while dormant. Trees and tree like shrubs should be pruned very judiciously, if at all, and should never be topped, stubbed, hatracked or otherwise defaced.

When to cut: Always study the plant's habit and map out your pruning plan before you begin. Because flowering ornamentals form their flower buds at different times of the year, you should adjust pruning times if you want to see flowers. Many spring-flowering plants such as azalea, forsythia, and rhododendron set flower buds in the fall, so pruning during the fall and winter months eliminates or decreases their spring flower display. Plants that typically flower during the summer form flower buds on new growth and can be pruned during the winter with no effect on their flowering. Examples of this type of plant are crape myrtle, hibiscus and abelia. As a general rule, plants that flower before June 1 should be pruned after they bloom while those that flower after June 1 are considered summer-flowering and can be pruned just prior to spring growth. One exception to this rule is the oakleaf hydrangea, a summer-flowering shrub that forms flower buds the previous season. Late-flowering azalea cultivars that bloom during June or even July are another exception. Prune both the oakleaf hydrangea and the azalea cultivars after they bloom.