

I often jokingly say, “The best time to prune a tree is when you are thinking about it, and when you have a sharp saw in your hand.” Although that’s perhaps how the real world works, it’s not usually the best time for the health of the tree. Did you know February and March are ideal times to prune most deciduous trees and shrubs? During dormancy, deciduous trees are void of leaves, thus providing a clear, non-obstructed view of the tree’s structure and form. Also, pruning when the plant is dormant maximizes wound closure time and helps to reduce the chance of transmitting disease.

Your first thought might be, “Why prune at all?” After all, trees and shrubs growing wild in nature certainly aren't pruned. Such a statement is somewhat inaccurate. Mother Nature does on occasion prune trees and shrubs—violently— through natural perils such as wind, snow, ice, hail and fire.

Although shrubs and trees growing in the home landscape are frequently subjected to similar perils, their situation is quite different. Trees and shrubs growing in the home landscape are personally selected, planted and cared for to achieve an aesthetic value.

If a tree grows naturally in the wild, and its first branch originates twelve inches above the surface of the soil, there it will remain unless some natural peril removes it. However, if that same scenario existed within the home landscape, such a low hanging branch would likely be pruned for one if not all three reasons: safety, health and aesthetics.

Pruning can be one of the most beneficial or one of the most detrimental maintenance practices for a tree. If done correctly, pruning can lengthen a tree's life, increase its value to the landscape and minimize liability problems for its owner. Improper pruning can cause a host of problems leading to a shortened lifespan, pest and decay problems, liability problems and a number of other significant problems.

Keep in mind, if one initially plants the proper species of tree best suited for the planting sight, pruning can be minimized. Start pruning when the tree is young and continue to prune on a routine basis.

Pruning for safety is important. Non-pruned shrubs and trees can easily obscure the view of motorists and/or pedestrians, thus creating potential liability hazards. Branches in danger of falling and causing injury to people or property should be pruned.

Pruning also maintains a strong, healthy plant. Removing diseased or damaged branches, crossing or rubbing branches and selectively removing branches that hinder strong structure occurs primarily to improve a tree's health. Although late dormancy is the best time to prune, if a tree or shrub is damaged during the growing season, it is best to prune it as quickly as possible to maintain the health and vigor of the plant.

Aesthetics play an important role in pruning. Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder, and, as a result, pruning for aesthetics generally involves enhancing the natural form of the tree or shrub.

Pruning is one of the most important and commonly practiced gardening techniques. However, fear of pruning is a nearly universal malady among gardeners. Where to prune, and Why to prune? Fear of cutting off too many branches or the wrong ones can be frightening. Fortunately, even the most intimidated can learn to prune.

Next week, I will continue with more on recommended procedures for proper pruning. Perhaps now might be a good time to examine closely your trees and shrubs. Look for the three reasons to prune. Now that February has arrived, it's time to start thinking about pruning. While you're at it, securing a sharp saw might be a good idea. You will need it.