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ASSESS TREES FOR PRUNING NEEDS

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Early to midwinter is not the best time to prune shade trees, but it is a great time to assess trees for pruning needs. Without leaves on trees, it is easier to see branch structure to identify branches that need removal.

Pruning is an important maintenance practice to develop good branch architecture and a more structurally sound tree. Pruning does create wounds a tree must expend energy to respond to. There should be a purpose to every cut that benefits the tree or avoid pruning.

Stand back to inspect a tree for pruning needs. Branches to remove include dead or damaged branches, branches crisscrossing and rubbing against another branch, those growing closely parallel to another branch, and branches with very narrow angled attachments which have included bark.

Included bark is most often found where there are codominant leaders or narrow forks between two branches. It occurs when the bark turns in on itself and can result in a weak attachment more prone to cracking or breakage.

Preventive pruning is best. If a tree already has crisscrossing branches or included bark, you've waited too long to prune. Pruning a little each year in the first 5 to 15 years after planting will help avoid branching issues in a tree.

Once problems arise, they are more difficult to remedy and the tree may already have damage. For example, with crisscrossing branches a wound may have occurred and decay may have already set in.

Be sure to assess younger trees as well as older trees for pruning needs. Keep in mind a tree should not be pruned more than 15 to 20 percent at any one time to reduce stress. Gradual pruning over the years is best. For larger trees, hire a professional tree care service for safety.

We know trees can be pruned most anytime without killing them, but there are ideal times to prune and times when pruning is best avoided. Winter, or anytime during the dormant season, was the recommended time to prune shade trees.

New research shows the optimum time to prune living branches is late spring and early summer. Pruning at this time promotes the quickest sealing of pruning wounds, known as CODIT or compartmentalization of decay in trees. This is the time when tree cells are most active during the growing season, hence sealing occurs quicker.

Professionals may not have a choice on timing, due to client work load or after a wind or ice storm when broken branches need to be removed for safety. But when a choice is possible, aim for the ideal time; especially if you are a do it yourselfer pruning smaller branches off of a smaller tree.

If you prune a smaller tree yourself, proper pruning cuts need to be made to help trees seal the wound. It is important to cut just outside the branch bark ridge and branch collar as these need to be left intact on the trunk. Diagrams showing where on a branch to prune can be found online.

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If you have a real Christmas tree, water it daily to keep it fresh and safe. A Christmas tree can take up to a gallon or more of water each day, depending on the tree's size and condition. Providing plenty of water will help keep the tree fresh, and maintain aroma, for four to five weeks. It is best to use water with no additives. Research has found that plain water is best. Commercial preservative mixes, aspirin, sugar, and other common home remedies do not provide any benefits in keeping Christmas trees fresh. If the tree stand does dry out, this will shorten the length of time a tree remains fresh. Once the water is gone, water-absorbing cells become plugged with resin and the tree's ability to continue to take up water is greatly reduced. The only way to fix the problem is to make a fresh cut to the base of the trunk; which is not an easy task to do with a decorated tree. Make it a habit to check Christmas tree water stands daily.

Firewood needs to be dry and seasoned for 6 to 12 months before burning. Moist wood burns at a cooler temperature leading to more smoke and dangerous creosote build-up in chimneys. Wood burns most efficiently when its moisture content is at 20% or less. While wood moisture meters are available, there are some ways to tell if wood is dry enough to burn efficiently. Use as many of these as possible to judge dryness. Checks and cracks in the end grain may be an indication of dryness. The color of wood tends to darken from white or cream to grey or yellow as it dries. Two dry pieces banged together will sound hollow while wet pieces sound solid and dull. Dry wood weighs much less than wet wood. After splitting a piece of wood, the newly exposed wood should not feel damp. If it does, it's too wet to burn. If in doubt, burn some. Dry wood ignites and burns easily; wet wood is hard to light and hisses in the fire. (Source: Michigan State University)

How often to water houseplants depends on many factors, including a plant's moisture needs, humidity levels, and container type. While an exact recommendation cannot be given, there are general guidelines. Plants grown in clay containers dry out faster than those in plastic containers. Larger plants need more water compared to smaller plants. If the container is too small for the plant and the amount of growing media has decreased over time, or the plant is root bound, watering frequency increases. To determine if moisture is needed, place a finger 1 to 2 inches into the potting mix. If dry, add room temperature water until excess water drains out of the pot's drainage holes. Poor off excess water that runs into the basin to avoid an overly wet soil. Wet soils lead to root rot and lack the oxygen needed for root growth. Yellow leaves are a sign of poor soil aeration due to overwatering, but they can also be a sign of underwatering.

Christmas cacti are natives of jungles, not deserts; and so they are not treated like desert cactus. Christmas cactus prefer bright, but indirect light. Too much direct sun can cause leaves to yellow. Regular household temperatures are fine. For many houseplants, our homes are too warm, especially at night, but as jungle natives, Christmas cacti are adapted to warmer night temperatures. This is one reason they are long-lived and can become family heirlooms. The soil of Christmas cactus needs to be kept constantly moist, but not wet. Again, as jungle natives, where humidity is high, they are used to consistently moist roots. As a rule, only fertilize Christmas cactus from spring through summer. Like most houseplants, fertilization is not recommended during winter. If a Christmas cactus you've had for a number of years is not blooming as well, consider repotting the plant since overcrowded roots can decrease flowering.

Deer browse a variety of landscape plants, especially when deer populations are high or forage is limited. Browsing by deer is identified by jagged or torn edges of twigs or stems and can occur from the ground up to 6 feet high on trees. Male deer also rub antlers against trees in the fall, which can kill or severely damage trees. Preventing deer damage is a challenge. Chemical repellents that affect smell, taste, and pain receptors of deer can limit browsing if other food is available. If forage is limited, deer will eat a bad smelling or tasting plant over going hungry. Repellents should be applied directly on the plant or nearby according to label direction, and reapplication will be needed so this is time consuming. Examples of deer repellents include Deer-Away Big Game Repellent, Miller's Hot Sauce, Hinder, Thiram and Plantskydd. Be sure to wear gloves or other personal protective items when applying repellents.