

Yard and Garden - 03-02-2013 - Ted Griess / Extension Horticulture Assistant

The thought of pruning a tree sometimes creates fear in the minds of homeowners. These individuals may realize that pruning is necessary, but due to their lack of know-how, they remain apprehensive. Rather than causing harm to a tree by improperly pruning, they simply avoid pruning altogether.

Although pruning is often necessary to remove dead branches, to improve tree structure, to enhance vigor or to maintain safety, the fact is most pruning of trees in the home landscape is done for personal reasons. Homeowners want their trees to be healthy, but more often they desire them to be aesthetically pleasing. Familiarity with certain pruning procedures is essential to achieve quality results.

Timing plays a significant role in quality pruning. From late February to mid-March, while trees remain fully dormant, is generally the ideal time to prune. Dormant deciduous trees are void of leaves. It is then the overall shape of a tree is openly visible. One can readily see if broken branches or other problems exist. Most importantly, pruning during dormancy allows the tree to take full advantage of an entire growing season to close the wound, and dormant pruning minimizes the risk of pest problems through the wound entry.

Pruning cuts must be made with an understanding of how the tree will respond to the cut. Improper pruning can cause damage that often remains for the life of the tree. Each cut should be made carefully, at the correct location, and leave a smooth surface with no jagged edges or torn bark. In most cases, the preferred location to make a pruning cut is at the point of union with the parent branch or trunk of the tree but just outside the **branch collar**.



The location of the branch collar varies among species. Experience will greatly assist in identifying its correct position. Generally, the branch collar is visible as a

swelling. It is located where the branch joins another branch or where it joins the trunk of a tree. The branch collar is vitally important for the health of the tree. The collar possesses the ability to close properly the pruning wound, thus protecting and retarding the spread of decay into the trunk of the tree. Removing a branch by making a flush cut to the trunk will almost always result in decay and disease entering the tree.

Interestingly, trees do not recover from a pruning wound in the same manner as we humans. When we are injured, such as from a cut, new cells form in the area of the cut thus regenerating the injured area—a term called healing. Trees do not heal. They close off a wounded area by a process called

compartmentalization. The wounded area remains for the life of the tree; however, the branch collar forms a callous of living tissue that surrounds the wound, eventually closing it off.

It is always best to prune trees when they are young for safety reasons, good health and pleasing structure. Younger trees tolerate the removal of living tissue better than mature trees. Smaller cuts compartmentalize more quickly than larger cuts. The older and larger a tree becomes, the less energy it has in reserve to close wounds and defend itself against disease and decay.

I can somewhat understand why people fear pruning and avoid it all together. However, I do know that proper pruning is a skill that can be mastered with confidence through study and practice. Many excellent publications exist to help homeowners with pruning skills. If one still remains fearful, consult a certified arborist. To locate a Nebraska certified arborist near you, visit the Nebraska Arborist Association's web site at <http://www.nearborist.org/>.

