

## **Yard and Garden - 03-17-2012 - Ted Griess / Extension Horticulture Assistant**

A strong similarity exists between pruning a tree or shrub and receiving a haircut. If a shrub or tree is pruned correctly, or if one gets a good haircut, both often go unnoticed. On the other hand, both a bad haircut and bad pruning can draw negative attention. To be a good barber or a good pruner involves a certain degree of skill and art. The skill is recognizing the imperfections and then removing them. The art involves cutting away so that when finished, all appears untouched and normal.

Gardeners often feel they lack the skill and/or the art to prune; thus, they frequently avoid pruning. Rather than taking the chance of causing potential harm to the plant, they refuse to prune. Unfortunately, if a pruning problem exists in a young shrub or tree, it generally exacerbates as the plant matures.

One could argue why prune in the first place; after all, trees and shrubs growing naturally in the wild certainly aren't pruned. That statement is somewhat inaccurate. Remember, Mother Nature does occasionally prune trees and shrubs— often violently— with 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 selected, planted and cared for to achieve aesthetic value.

When a tree grows naturally in the wild, it develops its branches according to nature. In the wild, should the first branch of a tree originate twelve inches above the surface of the soil, there it will remain. However, if that same scenario existed in the home landscape, a tree with a branch hanging that low would create numerous problems.

There are three reasons to prune. We prune for the health of the tree or shrub. We prune for our safety, and we prune for aesthetics.

When we prune for the health of the tree, we simply remove a part of the tree to benefit the whole. Keep in mind, when we cut away a branch or twig, it directly affects the tree's growth. Healthy pruning repairs damage, helps to control growth and can rid the plant of insect and/or disease problems.

Pruning for our safety involves removing potential hazards; whereas, pruning for aesthetics is practiced to achieve a pleasing look. Safety pruning might involve removing a portion of the shrub or tree for better visibility or removing a branch that poses a threat to life or property. Combined safety and aesthetic cuts might involve pruning off the lower branches of a tree as it grows taller, thus enhancing its appearance and improving pedestrian traffic beneath the tree's canopy.

Late winter or early spring before bud break is a good time to prune many **deciduous** trees and shrubs. When done at this time of year, callus tissue forms rapidly. For spring flowering shrubs or trees, it is best to wait and prune immediately after they have bloomed. With the foliage presently missing on deciduous trees and shrubs, one can easily scrutinize the shape and form of the plant.

Good pruning skills involve knowledge and foresight. Never make a cut without a clear picture of its probable effect on the tree. Nevertheless, as stated earlier, do not be so fearful of cutting that pruning is avoided altogether.

To start, one will need a good pair of pruning shears. If you plan to make cuts larger than the shears can handle, a lopping shear or tree saw works better.

As I began, a strong similarity exists between pruning trees and shrubs and receiving a haircut. If a shrub or tree is pruned properly or if one gets a good haircut, both go unnoticed. On the other hand, a bad haircut or improper pruning both draw negative attention.



Keep in mind, however, ramifications from a bad haircut and a good haircut are usually separated by only two weeks; whereas, the aftermath of poor pruning or proper pruning can last for the life of the tree or shrub.