

## 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.