

Slug: Ask the Master Gardener
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It is autumn and the home gardener's mind turns to thoughts of pruning trees. There are good reasons for pruning: trees require maintenance not only to encourage them to grow in a certain way, but also to keep them healthy and strong. When pruning is done correctly, many trees will not require a major annual pruning. The greatest temptation a home gardener may have, however, is to top a tree in order to reduce its size. Topping alters the natural form of a tree, makes it susceptible to disease, and weakens the tree at the point of new growth.

Instead of topping a tree, step back and decide what it is you would like to accomplish by pruning. Proper pruning can improve air and light circulation between stems and branches; it can also lessen the danger of a tree blowing over in a severe wind. You may want to improve a view or even change the balance between leaves and fruits.

Before you plant a tree, always remember to look up. Are there utility wires overhead or other trees nearby? How close are the eaves of your house or a neighbor's? In addition, do not forget about the spread of the tree's crown – how far will it extend from the main trunk? Will it spill over into your neighbor's driveway or block the view at an intersection? If a tree needs to be severely pruned every five to seven years, it is probably too large for the location and should be removed. It is always better to remove a tree rather than try to control its growth by topping it or lobbing off branches at a fence line or where they rub against a building. A good motto to keep in mind is "The right tree in the right place."

The most effective kind of pruning for most trees is a thinning cut. A thinning cut goes back to a branch's origin of growth or point of attachment. An example of this is pruning a branch back to another branch, or where a branch meets the main trunk. By pruning your tree this way, you will help maintain its natural form and you will be directing the growth of the remaining branches of the tree. Thinning cuts also help reduce unsightly sucker growth, allow more light and air to the center of the plant, reduce potential disease problems, and help the tree develop greater wind resistance.

Other reasons for pruning your tree include eliminating dead wood and rubbing or interfering branches. You will want to cut dead wood back to *but not into* live wood. Make a thinning cut below the site of disease or damage, back to the stem or branch's point of origin. Once you have made the cut, disinfect your pruning tools with a solution of 70% alcohol or rubbing alcohol. Then rinse and oil. Do not use chlorine bleach or your tools may rust. Use the same pruning technique for branches that grow into the plant instead of outward, or those that rub against other branches. This will maintain the tree's natural appearance but help to avoid problems in the future.

Tree topping is not a WSU Extension-recommended pruning method. Not only does tree topping endanger the health of the tree, it also can reduce property values and turn the tree into a safety hazard. Topping may leave the plant unable to create a callus over the exposed internal wood, leaving the tree unable to heal itself, which may lead to disease. Topping cuts also produce the rank growth of suckers resulting in a disfigured and unattractive tree. Topping trees is not the answer. If a tree is too high or large, replace it with a species that is smaller at maturity.

Thinning cuts will help you maintain your tree's health while at the same time reducing its size and directing its growth. The best time to prune is late winter and early spring after a general warming trend. These are the periods when pruned limbs can form callus tissue and readjust more rapidly. In addition, insect and disease activity is lower at this time than during other seasons of the year. Pruning in late summer or early fall can cause vigorous re-growth, but this new growth may not harden off by winter. Wounds close more slowly and diseases may be able to enter the interior wood through exposed cuts.

This fall, instead of feeling the pressure to prune your trees and clean up the yard, why not step back instead and plan for next year? Examine the overall growth pattern of your tree and make note of which branches are growing in the wrong direction or rubbing against other branches. In late winter or early spring, you will be ready to be out in the garden again, and this time you will have the knowledge and proper pruning techniques to help you maintain a healthier and more attractive landscape tree.

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This column is written by Washington State University/Skagit County certified Master Gardeners. Questions may be submitted to WSU/Skagit County Extension, 306 S. First Street, Mount Vernon, WA 98273-3805.

