



Tree Pruning

You can cut it! Most established trees need very little maintenance. But there are times when – for safety, health or appearance – you will need to perform some light pruning chores. With some basic guidelines, pruning is relatively safe and easy. If you have any doubts, however, about the safety of a pruning project, we suggest you hire a professional tree care company.

What You'll Need.

Gloves
Loppers
Hand pruners
Pruning saw
Pole pruner (*optional*)
Hedge clippers (*optional*)
Sturdy ladder (*optional*)
[TROY-BILT® chipper/shredder](#)



STEP 1 Determine what to prune.

Some pruning is done for simple safety reasons, such as removing a dead limb that hangs over the driveway. Other pruning tasks are performed to improve tree health or to encourage proper growth. Still other pruning is done simply to enhance the appearance of a tree. (Pruning fruit trees to increase fruit production is not covered in this project article.)

Here are a few guidelines to help determine if you need to prune.

- Remove all broken, split and twisted limbs. If a limb has completely broken off of the tree, cut the broken branch back to healthy, undamaged growth – or back to the trunk or main branch.
- Remove all dead and diseased limbs.
- Remove limbs that cross over or rub against one another, as well as limbs that are growing densely.
- Remove low-hanging limbs that get in the way of walking or mowing.
- Improve an unbalanced tree shape by selective pruning.
- Evergreen trees that have reached the desired size can be carefully “sheared” (light, branch-end pruning) every year to maintain this size and shape almost indefinitely.
- Prune newly planted, young trees to remove damaged limbs, but do NOT prune

back aggressively until the roots are well-established.

- Young trees may also benefit from formative pruning to encourage proper growth and development.

STEP 2 Determine when to prune.

Damaged and diseased limbs should be pruned immediately, no matter what time of year. New trees should be lightly pruned as needed when planted.

Other pruning should be done at the appropriate time of year for the type of tree.

- Late winter is the best time to prune most trees, including fruit trees.
- Late spring and early summer are a good time to shape pine trees by lightly shearing, because new branch-end growth will quickly cover the cuts.
- Late summer or early fall is the best time to prune maples, birches and cherries, since they will “bleed” sap in late winter through spring.

If you are working to restore a neglected tree, mid summer is a good time to prune. Summer pruning can mildly stunt growth and therefore allows the tree to put its energy to building overall health. Cuts from summer pruning are also more likely to form a full callus over the wound, which is good for stressed trees that may be prone to disease or insect damage.

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STEP 3 Making the cut.

If you are removing whole limbs, be sure to leave the branch collar untouched. (The collar is the slightly wider part of the limb at the trunk joint.) The collar actually contains natural chemicals that help speed healing of the cut. If you cut the limb off too close, you will damage the bark. Too far and you will leave "stubs" which will encourage the growth of unwanted shoots.

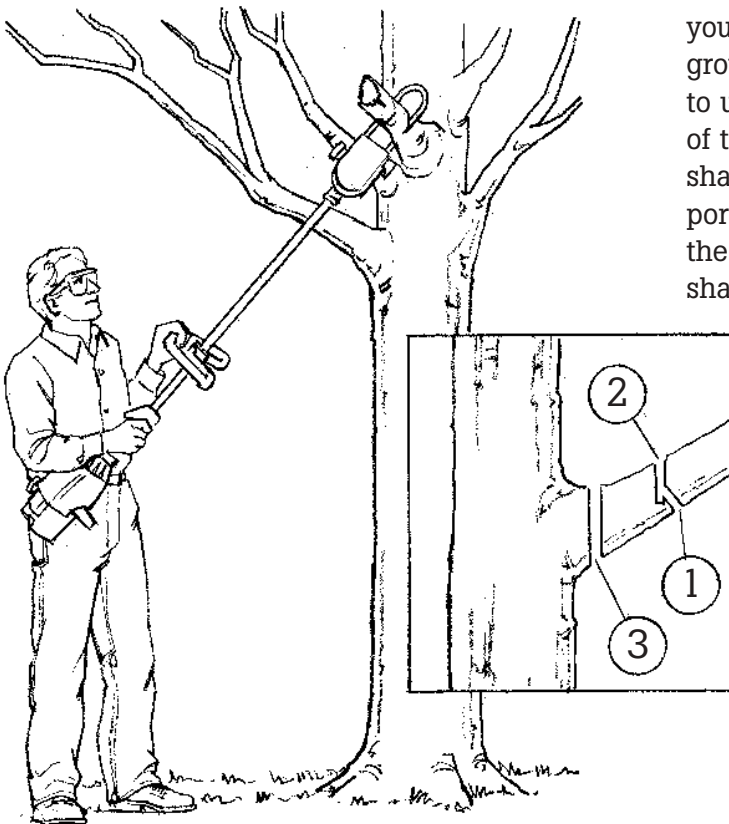
For small limbs and branches, use loppers or hand pruners. Be careful to make a clean, smooth cut. Angle the cuts so that water will not collect on the wound and cause rot. Clean up any jagged ends or ripped bark.

For larger limbs, use a pruning saw and the "3-cut system." With this system, you cut the limb off in stages in order to control the removal and prevent tearing of wood and bark. Cut #1 is an undercut about half way through the limb, 8 – 10 inches away from the joint. Cut #2 goes all the way through the limb, from the top, meeting cut #1. At this stage, most of the limb is removed. Cut #3 is a cleanup cut that removes the "stump" of the limb. This cut is made just outside of the branch collar (see diagram below).

If you are pruning higher branches, you will need a long pole pruner or a ladder – and a partner to hold the ladder while you work!

To trim an evergreen tree for shape, you will usually remove only the newer growth at the branch ends. You may choose to use hedge clippers for this task instead of trimming every limb individually. Always shape an evergreen so that the lower portion of the tree is slightly wider than the upper portion (a classic Christmas tree shape). Otherwise the lower branches will suffer from being shaded.

After pruning, you may choose to paint over the cuts with tar or sealer. While many people say that this practice does the tree no actual good, we feel that it can perhaps help by keeping moisture from entering the wound – and that it certainly does no harm.



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Be careful not to over-prune.

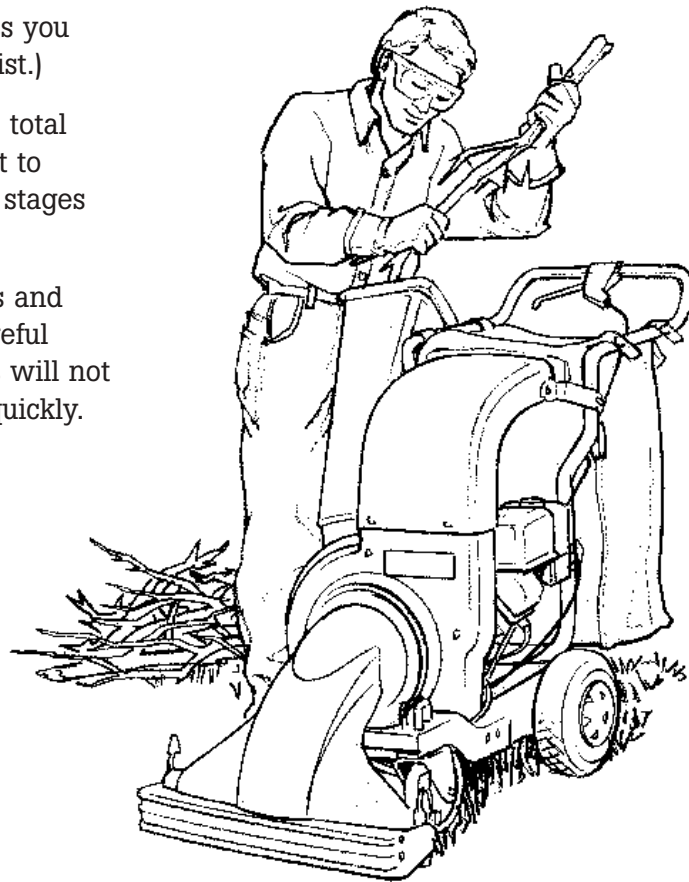
Remember that most trees need very little pruning and, in fact, over-pruning can harm a tree by adversely affecting the growth habit and sometimes the very health of the tree. To guard against problems from over-pruning, remember the following rules of thumb:

- Selective pruning should be done with the goal of maintaining the natural shape and habit of the tree. (Unless you are creating an espaliered fruit tree or topiary, which you may not want to attempt unless you are a somewhat experienced arborist.)
- Never remove more than 1/3 of the total foliage in any one year. If you want to drastically re-shape a tree, do it in stages over several years.
- Aggressive pruning of most spruces and pine trees should be done with careful consideration to shape, since pines will not fill out or re-grow main branches quickly.



Clean up, step back and admire!

Clean up all the pruned limbs from beneath your trees. Discard or burn diseased wood. Other limbs can be turned into wood chips or mulch. (See our related article on [MAKING YOUR OWN MULCH.](#)) For wood chips, simply run the limbs and twigs (leaves and all!) through your [TROY-BILT® chipper/shredder](#). You can use these wood chips around the base of your trees to further enhance their newly pruned good looks!



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