

NORTHWOODS YARD & GARDEN

Weekly Column

March 4, 2024

Pointers on Pruning Trees

Now is an ideal time for dormant pruning of deciduous trees. While leafless, it is easy to see branch framework and trees respond quickly when the growing season resumes. While each individual tree has specific needs, there are general guidelines for pruning landscape trees.

Controlling growth is a primary objective when pruning trees; but should not be a substitute for planting a large tree in a small space. Always cut back to lateral branches or shoots when reducing tree height or length of branches. The universal tree response to pruning is invigorating the remaining shoots and buds, so plan cuts accordingly.

Two types of pruning cuts are heading-back and thinning-out. Heading-back cuts are made in the newest branch growth and create dense, compact growth as buds adjacent to cuts develop. Thinning-out cuts shorten or remove branches entirely, reducing the number of remaining laterals, resulting in more open, rangy growth.

When removing limbs, follow a sequence of three cuts. Make the first cut under the limb, cutting in about one-third of the way, a short distance from the trunk. This prevents bark from stripping down the trunk when the limb is removed and making large, jagged wounds.

Make cut two, just outside the first cut, going from the top all the way through, removing the limb. Make cut three inside the first cut, removing the stub.

When making cut three it is critical to leave collar areas of branch bases on trunks, rather than making flush cuts. Collars help assure wounds are small, develop callus tissue, and close quickly to minimize decay. In contrast, larger flush cut wounds often show significant internal trunk decay later.

When using the proper pruning tool and making a good clean cut, there is no need to coat wounds with dressing. Trees will develop callus tissue and “wall off” wounds on their own. If old wounds exist on the trunk, do not attempt to clean them out, as this may compromise tree defense system efforts.

Now into April, before leaves start to develop, is ideal timing for pruning many deciduous trees. Rapid plant development is maintained and wounds callus quickly. Wait until late spring for “bleeders” like maples, elm, and birch. For oaks, prune before April 15 or wait until fall dormancy due to the threat of oak wilt entering fresh wounds in summer.

A sunny early spring day over the coming weeks is a wonderful time to get out and prune! Check here next week for details on pruning flowering shrubs.

Interested in learning more about
Horticulture in Iron County?
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