Don't top your tree 🚫

Topping is not pruning. Topping is the indiscriminate removal of branch ends. Topping injures and ultimately results in early failure or death of a tree.


Topped tree

Topped tree with regrowth

Where to Cut

Support the branch with one hand while you make the cut to prevent the bark from ripping. If the branch is too large to support, use the three-step method (see details below).

For the final cut, look for the branch bark ridge and trunk collar. Begin the cut just outside of the branch bark ridge, and angle down away from the trunk. Stay close to the trunk collar without cutting into it (see images below).

branch bark ridge

trunk collar

Three-step method
1. Cut one-third of the way through the branch on the under side.
2. Go 2-4 inches beyond the undercut to remove the branch.
3. Make the final cut just outside the branch bark ridge and trunk collar.
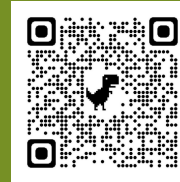
small branch

larger branch

final cut
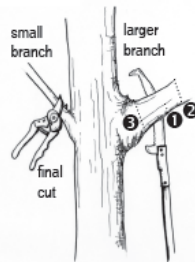
Sources

The following resources were used as sources for this brochure. For more information, please consult them:

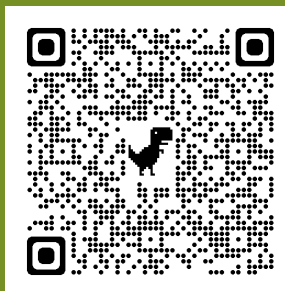University of Minnesota Extension: Pruning trees and shrubs
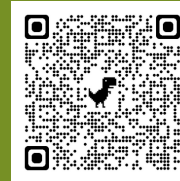
Tree Owner's Manual
www.treeownersmanual.info

City Trees

Free and low-cost trees for Minneapolis residents and businesses

Visit our website!

Pruning recommendations

Minneapolis
Health

Safety first! ⚠️

Pruning can be dangerous work. Follow these safety precautions to be sure you are around to enjoy your tree.

- **Electricity flows through branches:** Never prune trees or branches that are within 10 feet of utility lines; instead contact your local utility company.
- **Ladders and trees do not mix:** If pruning cannot be done with both feet on the ground, hire an arborist.
- **Chainsaws cut limbs:** If power equipment is required, hire an arborist.

Pruning tools

The right tools make pruning easier and help you do a good job. Keeping tools well-maintained and sharp will improve their performance.

- Pruning shears for cuts up to 3/4 inches in diameter.
- Lopping shears to cut branches up to 1 1/2 inches in diameter.
- Hedge shears are meant only for pruning hedges, nothing else.
- Hand saws are very important for cutting branches over 1 inch in diameter.
- Pole saws allow for extended reach with a long handle.

General pruning guidelines

- Remove diseased, broken or dead branches.
- Remove any downward-growing branches.
- If two limbs are crossed, entangled or otherwise competing, remove one of them completely at its base.
- Remove any limbs along the trunk that are bigger in diameter than the trunk.
- Remove suckers coming up from the roots or low on the trunk.
- Remove vigorous vertical branches, called watersprouts.
- Make pruning cuts close to the branch collar at the base of the limb.
- For larger limbs, start the cut from the underside of the limb to avoid tearing the bark.
- Remove large limbs first, starting with the top of the tree.
- "Thinning" cuts remove entire branches at the branch collar and are usually the recommended type of cut.
- "Heading" cuts remove only part of a branch and encourage vegetation growth below the cut and are not as common.
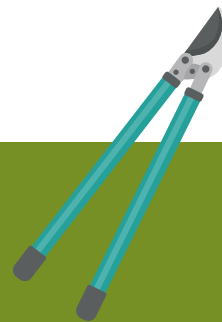
When to prune

The late dormant season (late winter to early spring) is best for most pruning.

Pruning Young Trees

Pruning a young tree saves money. Removing small branches is fairly easy compared with waiting until limbs are large, when pruning can be costly and a bigger risk to the tree. Correctly pruning a tree when it's young will help it develop a strong, well-balanced crown. Prune to have the following:

- **A.** Branches that are well-attached to the trunk.
- **B.** One central leader: Choose one leader to keep and prune off the competitors.
- **C.** Good spacing between branches.
- **D.** Enough clearance between the ground and first branch. Over time, gradually remove low branches.
- **E.** Good crown height: The crown of a deciduous tree should be at least 60 percent of the total tree height.

Do not remove more than 25 percent of the tree's live branches (and therefore leaves) at any one time.

Quick facts

- **Pruning changes the form and growth of a plant.**
- **Pruning can also be considered preventive maintenance for both insect and disease damage.**
- **Many problems may be prevented by pruning correctly during the formative years for a tree or shrub.**
- **The late dormant season is the best time for most pruning.**

A Well-attached branches have a branch bark ridge.