What Is the Correct Way to Prune My Trees?

Why Prune?
Pruning alters the shape and growth of a plant. It’s the best preventive maintenance a young tree can receive and is critical to the development of a strong structure. Pruning can also promote tree health. Removing dead or dying branches, branch stubs, and branches that rub together helps keep trees healthy.

Never try to prune near any electrical wires. Instead, contact your utility company to do the work.

When to Prune
Late winter, just before spring growth starts, is best for most pruning. Fresh wounds are then exposed for only a short length of time before new growth begins the wound-sealing process. It’s also easier without leaves to see the tree’s branching structure. It’s very important to not prune oak trees between early April and September, the months when open wounds leave these trees susceptible to disease-carrying insects.

Pruning Young Trees
Remove crossing branches as well as those that grow back towards the center of the tree, without cutting back the tallest, central branch (the “leader”). As young trees grow, remove lower branches gradually to raise the crown, and remove branches too close together on the trunk. Remove multiple leaders on evergreens and other trees where a single leader is desirable.

How to Prune Young Trees
See the fact sheet, “How Do I Care for Storm-damaged Trees?” for instructions on proper limb cutting where there is a branch collar. The branch collar is a swollen area where the branch joins the main stem. Remember not to cut into the branch collar, and take care not to leave too much of a stub; both can cause decay. The wound-sealing done by the branch collar happens more quickly when your cut is smooth and clean.

Next, look where branches connect to the tree and you’ll see bark pushing up from the topside of this attachment. This is the branch bark ridge. Begin your cut outside the branch bark ridge, being careful not to cut into it. If there is no ridge, there may be what’s called “included bark,” on those branches or stems. These are weak branch unions that should be removed. Prune these when branches are small.

Pruning Large Established Trees
Leave large tree pruning to qualified tree care professionals (see the fact sheet, “When Should I Hire a Forestry Professional?”). The three types of pruning they most commonly do are crown thinning to allow more light penetration and air movement; crown raising to allow more clearance on lawns, sidewalks, streets, etc.; and crown reduction to reduce height (only done when absolutely necessary).

Source: University of Minnesota Extension Service Faculty.

Want to know more?
INFORMATION ON THE WEB
www.na.fs.fed.us/spfo/pubs/howtos/ht_prune/addinfo.htm
www.extension.umn.edu/environment