

Pruning Cuts

Three general types of cuts are used in arboricultural pruning: branch removal cut (thinning cut), reduction cut, and heading cut. Removal cuts are preferred because they leave the branch protection zone intact.

Branch Removal Cut (Thinning Cut)

When removing a branch at its point of origin on a trunk, stem, or larger branch, make the cut as close to the trunk as possible without cutting into the branch bark ridge or branch collar and without leaving a stub (Figure 13). The cut should leave a smooth surface with no jagged edges or torn bark. If there is no collar, the top of the cut should be located where the top of the branch makes an abrupt upward turn into the union. The correct position varies among trees and branches. Pruning here most closely simulates where branches are shed naturally. The bottom of the cut can be located according to Figure 13. Except on large limbs, the branch protection zone allows for compartmentalization of the wound. If there is a bark inclusion in the union, cut as far down into the union as possible without injuring trunk wood.

Large or heavy branches should be removed using three cuts. The first one undercuts the limb 1 to 2 feet (0.3 to 0.6 m) out from the parent branch or trunk. The undercut reduces the chance of the branch “peeling” or tearing bark as it is removed. The second cut is the top cut, which on small branches should be made directly above the undercut or slightly farther out on the limb than the undercut. The third and final cut is to remove the stub carefully without tearing bark below the cut.

With large trees, branches often need to be lowered rather than dropped to the ground to reduce damage to the tree and objects below the tree. This procedure is done with ropes, cranes, or other equipment. Details on these procedures can be found in *The Art and Science of Practical Rigging* (DVDs and accompanying book published by the International Society of Arboriculture).

When removing a dead branch, the final cut should be made just outside the collar of living tissue (Figure 14). If the collar has grown along a dead branch stub, only the dead stub should be removed. The collar contains live tissue and should not be injured or removed.

Reduction Cut (Cutting to a Lateral, Lateral Cut, Drop-Crotch Cut)

A reduction cut shortens a limb or branch back to a smaller lateral branch or similarly sized limb (Figure 15). Reduction cuts commonly are used in

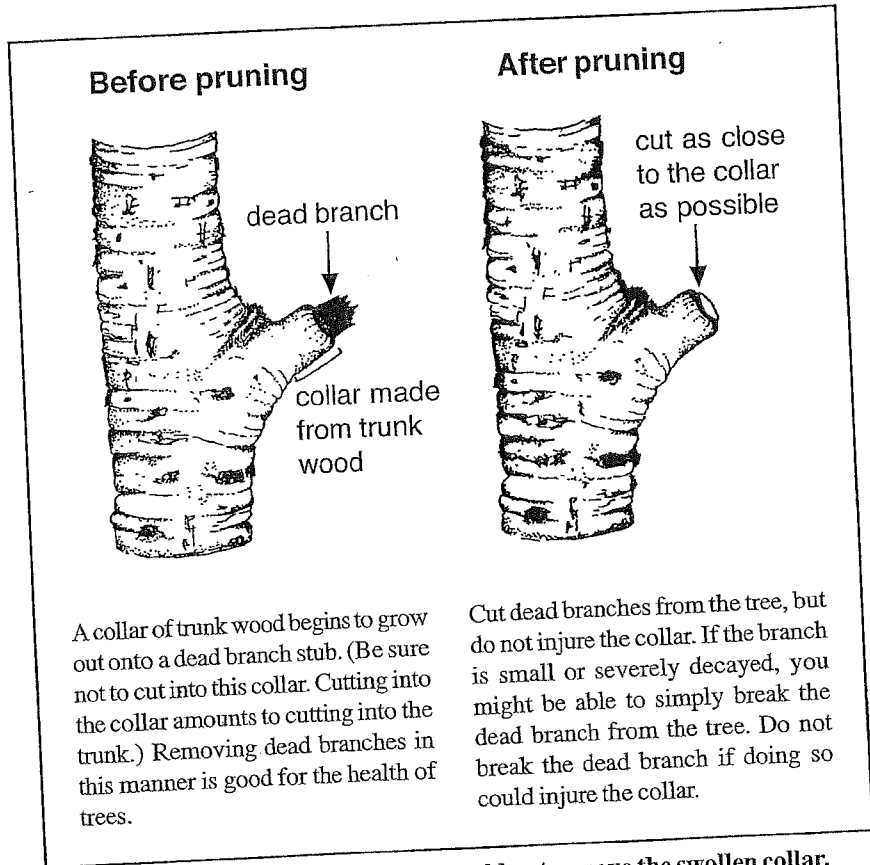


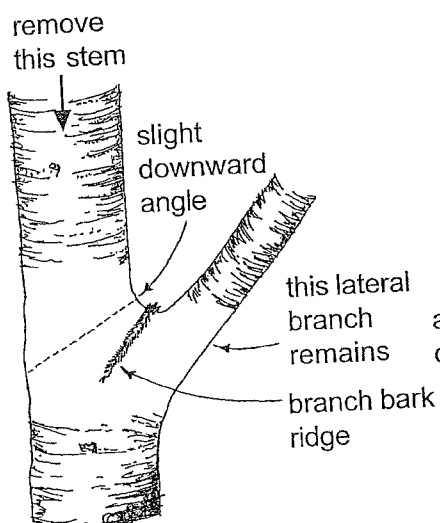
Figure 14. Removing a dead branch should not remove the swollen collar.

structural pruning or when reducing tree size. A stem is cut back to a lateral capable of sustaining the remaining limb and assuming the terminal role. A common rule of thumb is that the remaining lateral branch should be at least one-third to one-half the diameter of the removed portion. At such a size, the lateral branch should be able to produce enough energy to keep the parent branch alive, and enough growth regulator should be present to suppress excessive sprouting on many species. This rule varies with tree species, age, and condition, and with climate. Old, stressed, or mature trees could decline or become more stressed if too much foliage is removed.

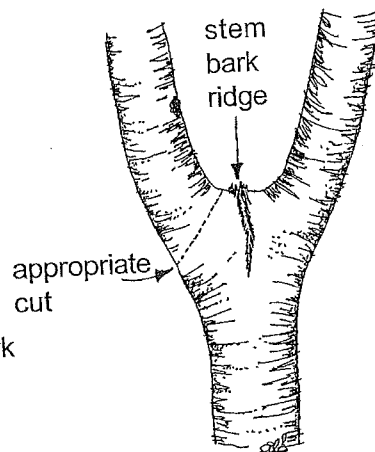
When possible, avoid large reduction cuts (more than 2 inches [5 cm] diameter) on permanent scaffold limbs. Avoiding large cuts is less important on limbs that will be removed from the tree later. On permanent branches, it also is important to consider the ability of the lateral branch to sustain the limb. Cutting back to

Reduction Cuts

Removed stem larger than branch



Stems of equal size



Determining where to make an appropriate reduction cut: To reduce a stem back to a lateral branch, make the cut at a slight downward angle without damaging the remaining stem or cutting any part of the branch bark ridge.

Determining where to make an appropriate reduction cut: Begin the cut just beyond the edge of the stem bark ridge. Cut at an angle to minimize the size of the exposed pruning wound. This location is approximately along the dashed line. There is no natural boundary to resist decay inside the cut stem from reduction cuts.

A reduction cut removes a stem or branch back to a lateral branch or stem that is large enough to assume the terminal role. Typically, this lateral branch should be at least one-third the diameter of the removed portion. If the lateral branch that remains is less than one-third the diameter of the removed stem, then the cut is considered a heading cut. A heading cut is considered inappropriate on most landscape trees. A reduction cut may cause some decay behind the cut. The extent of decay depends on the diameter of the cut and the tree species. Larger-diameter cuts (greater than about 2 to 3 inches [5 to 7.6 cm]) are likely to cause more decay than smaller cuts.

Figure 15. A reduction cut shortens a stem back to a lateral branch.

a lateral that is insufficient in size is much like making a topping or heading cut. A pruning cut that reduces the length of a branch or parent stem shall be made at a slight downward angle relative to the remaining stem and not damage the remaining stem. Smaller cuts shall be preferred. (Figure 15). Cutting *toward* the branch bark ridge reduces the risk of the union splitting out.

Trees do not compartmentalize this type of wound as well as the wound created following a removal cut. The ability of the tree to compartmentalize the wound is a function of the size of the cut, the age of the cut stem or branch, tree vigor or vitality, species, and perhaps the time of year. The smaller the cut and the more vigorous the tree, the better the wound closure and compartmentalization.

Heading Cut

A heading cut (topping cut, lopping cut) is made between branches. This type of cut leaves a stub. These cuts rarely are appropriate on established trees. They can, however, be used on current season's growth to remove old flower heads and developing fruit or to reduce the length of a branch or sprout to improve appearance. Heading cuts are used in the first year of pollarding. Heading should not be used to reduce the height or size of trees in other instances. This practice is called topping and is extremely damaging to shade trees. Shearing (or rounding-over) large-maturing trees also is inappropriate because it causes a profusion of sprouts that grow rapidly into a dense mass of foliage. This practice spoils good tree architecture and can significantly increase maintenance requirements. Shearing is appropriate and commonly practiced on shrubs to maintain size.

Wound Dressing

Wound dressings are treatments applied to pruning cuts or other tree wounds. Traditionally, they were formulated with asphalt-based products in paint or spray form. Wound dressings once were thought to accelerate wound closure and reduce decay. Research shows that these products do not reduce the spread of decay. However, studies have shown beneficial effects of wound dressings in reducing borer attack and oak wilt infection and controlling sprout production and mistletoe. Wound dressings are used primarily for cosmetic purposes, and neither are required nor recommended in most cases. If a dressing must be applied, only a light coating of a nonphytotoxic material should be used.

How Much to Prune

Energy reserves (starch, sugars, and oils) are stored in branches, stems, trunk, and roots. This energy can be preserved by removing the fewest number of live branches necessary to accomplish the desired objective. Excessive branch removal depletes these reserves and reduces the ability of the tree to photosynthesize more energy. There should be a good reason to remove more than 25 percent of the live crown in a single year. Many trees generate adventitious sprouts in response to overpruning as they attempt to replace the stored energy. Live branch pruning, however, is an essential ingredient to forming good structure, so it is a necessary procedure in an urban tree care program.

When to Prune

The best time to prune live branches depends on the desired results. Removal of dying, diseased, broken, rubbing, or dead limbs can be accomplished any time, with little negative effect on the tree.

Growth is maximized and defects are easier to see on deciduous trees if live-branch pruning is done in the winter or before growth resumes in early spring. Pruning when trees are dormant can minimize the risk of pest problems associated with wounding and allows trees to take advantage of the full growing season to close and compartmentalize wounds. Trees with Dutch elm disease should have diseased branches removed as soon as a branch shows flagging.

The timing of pruning can be an important part of a Plant Health Care program. For example, one of the ways to reduce the spread of oak wilt or Dutch elm disease fungus is to prune during the dormant season and avoid pruning susceptible species during the time of the vector beetle flight in areas where disease is a problem.

Plant growth rate can be reduced if live-branch pruning takes place during or soon after the initial growth flush. This is the period when trees have just expended a great deal of stored energy to produce roots, foliage, and early shoot growth, so pruning at this time usually is not recommended because of the potential stresses. Do not prune live branches from stressed trees at this time because they need all their live foliage to help recover.

Flowering can be prevented or enhanced by pruning at the appropriate time of the year. To retain the most flowers on landscape trees that bloom on current season's growth, such as crapemyrtle (*Lagerstroemia* spp.) or linden (*Tilia* spp.), prune these trees in winter, prior to leaf emergence, or in the summer just after bloom. Plants that bloom on last season's wood, such as crabapples (*Malus* spp.) and cherries (*Prunus* spp.), should be pruned just after bloom in order to preserve the flower display. Fruit trees can be pruned during the dormant season to enhance structure and distribute fruiting wood, and they are pruned after bloom to thin fruit.

Certain species of trees, such as maples (*Acer* spp.) and birches (*Betula* spp.), drip sap (bleed) when pruned in the early spring when sap flow is heavy (Table 4). Although unattractive, sap drainage has little negative effect on tree growth or health. Some of the sap dripping can be avoided by pruning in summer or at other times of the year.

Table 4. Trees that often drip sap (bleed) when pruned in late winter or early spring.

Avocado (*Persea americana*)
Birch (*Betula* spp.)
Cottonwood (*Populus* spp.)
Elm (*Ulmus* spp.)
Flowering dogwood (*Cornus florida*)
Hackberry (*Celtis* spp.)
Honeylocust (*Gleditsia triacanthos*)
Magnolia (*Magnolia* spp.)
Maple (*Acer* spp.)
Mesquite (*Prosopis* spp.)
Poplar (*Populus* spp.)
Silk-oak (*Grevillea robusta*) -
Walnut (*Juglans* spp.)
Willow (*Salix* spp.)

Tools

Pruning tools adequate for the size of cuts being made should be selected. Tools should be sharp so as to make clean cuts without jagged edges or stubs. Dull, anvil-type pruning tools, with a blade that cuts to a flat surface, should be avoided because they crush tissue; tools with bypass (scissors-type) blades are preferred. Place the blade side of the pruner toward the tree and squeeze the blade *up* through or *across* the branch. Passing the blade *down* through the branch can cause the union to split.

Equipment and work practices that damage living tissue and bark beyond the scope of the work should be avoided. Climbing spurs are not to be used to climb trees for pruning operations except when limbs are more than a throwline distance apart and there are no other means of climbing the tree, when the bark is thick enough to prevent damage to the cork cambium (for example, on thick-barked species such as mature redwoods), to reach an injured worker, or when removing the entire tree.

Although probably a rare occurrence, the probability of spreading pathogens on pruning tools varies with the particular disease, the plant, the pruning tools used, the environmental conditions, and the timing. Chain saws are difficult, if not impossible, to sterilize during pruning operations. If tools are sterilized, it is important to use a material that will not injure plant tissues or damage tools. Materials commonly used to sterilize tools include bleach (10 percent solution), Lysol, and automotive antifreeze.

Pruning Specifications

Written specifications are the core of executing good pruning. Without good specifications, each arborist bidding on a pruning job bids on the work he or she thinks should be done, and this decision could vary widely among arborists. Municipalities, condominium and home owner associations, and commercial property managers may benefit most from using specifications. Commercial tree care companies should use ANSI A300 terms when writing pruning specifications on their work orders.

Specifications should include objectives of the pruning, pruning types to be used, size range of branches to remove, percentage of live crown to remove, and location of branches (Table 5). The specifications should state that all work shall be performed according to the ANSI A300 pruning standard and the ANSI Z133.1 safety standard.

Table 5. Minimum pruning specification requirements.

- Clearly state which trees are to be pruned.
- Include a statement that all work shall be performed in accordance with the ANSI A300 pruning standard and the ANSI Z133.1 safety standard.
- Include clearly defined pruning objectives.
- Specify the pruning types to be performed to meet the objectives.
- State the size specifications of the minimum and/or maximum branch size to be removed.
- Specify the maximum amount (expressed as a percentage) of live tissue that can be removed.

Example 1

Specification example to include in a request for bids for pruning medium-aged and mature trees

(The following is only an example and should not be used as is. Develop specifications based on your needs, the objectives of the customer, and the condition and size of the trees to be pruned.)

“Shall” refers to a practice that is mandatory; “should” refers to a practice that is recommended. If a “should” recommendation will not be followed, a written explanation must be provided.

Objectives

Twenty-seven oak trees along Sweetwater Lane from 1600 block to 1800 block shall be pruned to improve structure and reduce the risk of limb failure by

1. cleaning the entire crown of each tree by removing all undesirable branches greater than 1-inch (2.5 cm) diameter.
2. reducing the length of long, horizontal branches by about 5 feet (1.5 m).
3. reducing the length of branches or stems with included bark by 5 to 10 feet (1.5 to 3 m).
4. reducing or thinning by 20 percent any limbs that require cabling.

Procedures

1. Live branches less than 1-inch (2.5 cm) diameter should not be removed from the interior of the crown (some branches may need to be removed to allow the arborist to enter and work in the trees). No live branches greater than 4-inch (10 cm) diameter shall be removed from the tree without authorization from owner or owner's agent.
2. Dead, diseased, or broken branches greater than 1-inch (2.5 cm) diameter (measured at the base of the branch) shall be removed from the canopy of all trees.
3. No more than 20 percent of live foliage shall be removed from any tree.
4. Swollen collars, even if they are quite large, shall remain on the tree following removal of dead branches.
5. Pruning cuts shall be in accordance with ANSI A300 pruning standard, and work shall be performed in accordance with the ANSI Z133.1 safety standard. Pruning shall be in accordance with ISA's *Best Management Practices: Tree Pruning*.

Personnel Qualifications

All work should be performed under the supervision of an ISA Certified Arborist or state licensed arborist.

Example 2

Sample work order for residential tree work

(The following is only an example and should not be used as is. Develop work orders based on your needs, the desires and objectives of the customer, and the condition and size of the trees to be pruned.)

“Shall” refers to a practice that is mandatory; “should” refers to a practice that is recommended. If a “should” recommendation will not be followed, a written explanation must be provided.

Pruning Types to Execute on This Job (Check All That Apply)

structural clean thin raise reduce restore

Objectives and Procedures

1. Reduce potential for failure in large, front-yard white oak (*Quercus alba*) by
 - cleaning (1-inch [2.5 cm] diameter and larger).
 - removing north limb (8-inch [20 cm] diameter) with split crotch and included bark.
2. Raise 12-inch (30 cm) green ash (*Fraxinus pennsylvanica*) in rear to allow under-clearance of 8 feet (2.5 m).
3. Clean (branches greater than 1-inch [2.5 cm] diameter) and thin (remove branches between 1/2- and 1-inch [1.2 to 2.5 cm] diameter only) maple by vegetable garden to allow greater sunlight penetration.

General

No live branches greater than 5-inch (12.5 cm) diameter shall be removed from the tree without authorization from the home owner. No more than 20 percent of live foliage will be removed from the tree. Pruning cuts shall be in accordance with ANSI A300 pruning standard, and work shall be performed in accordance with the ANSI Z133.1 operations standard. Pruning shall be in accordance with ISA's *Best Management Practices: Tree Pruning*.

Glossary

ANSI A300—In the United States, industry-developed, national consensus standards of practice for tree care.

ANSI Z133.1—In the United States, industry-developed, national consensus safety standards of practice for tree care.

arboriculture—Practice and study of the care of trees and other woody plants in the landscape.

arborist—Professional who possesses the technical competence gained through experience and related training to provide for or supervise the management of trees and other woody plants in residential, commercial, and public landscapes.

bark inclusion—See included bark.

best management practices—Best-available, industry-recognized courses of action, in consideration of the benefits and limitations, based on scientific research and current knowledge.

branch—A stem arising from a larger stem; a subdominant stem; the pith in true branches has no connection to the parent stem.

branch bark ridge—Raised strip of bark at the top of a branch union, where the growth and expansion of the trunk or parent stem and adjoining branch push the bark into a ridge.

branch collar—Area where a branch joins another branch or trunk that is created by the overlapping vascular tissues from both the branch and the trunk. Typically enlarged at the base of the branch.

branch protection zone—Chemically and physically modified tissue within the trunk or parent branch at the base of a smaller, subordinate branch that retards the spread of discoloration and decay from the subordinate stem into the trunk or parent branch.

cambium—Thin layer(s) of meristematic cells that give rise (outward) to the phloem and (inward) to the xylem, increasing stem and root diameter.

cleaning—Selective pruning to remove dead, diseased, cracked, and broken branches and foreign objects.

climbing spurs—Sharp devices strapped to a climber's lower legs to assist in climbing poles or trees being removed. Also called spikes, gaffs, irons, hooks, or climbers.

closure—The process in a woody plant by which woundwood grows over a pruning cut or injury.

codominant stem—Forked branches nearly the same diameter (diameter ratios > 80 percent), arising from a common junction and lacking a normal branch union.

compartmentalization—Natural defense process in trees by which chemical and physical boundaries are created that act to limit the spread of disease and decay organisms.

crown—Upper part of a tree, measured from the lowest branch, including all the branches and foliage.

decay—(1) (*noun*) An area of wood that is undergoing decomposition. (2) (*verb*) decomposition of organic tissues by fungi or bacteria.

dominant leader/trunk/stem—The stem that grows much larger than all other stems and branches.

frond—Large, divided leaf structure found in palms and ferns.

good structure/architecture/form—Branch and trunk architecture resulting in a canopy form that resists failure.

heading—Cutting a shoot back to a bud or cutting branches back to buds, stubs, or lateral branches not large enough to assume apical dominance. Cutting an older branch or stem back to a stub in order to meet a structural objective.

included bark—Bark that becomes embedded in a crotch (union) between branch and trunk or between codominant stems. Causes a weak structure.

interior foliage—Typically small-diameter (less than 3 inches [7.6 cm]) branches with foliage on the interior or inner portion of the crown.

kerf—Slit or cut made by a saw in a log. Space created by a saw cut.

lateral—A branch arising from a larger stem or branch.

leader—Primary terminal shoot or trunk of a tree. Large, usually upright stem. A stem that dominates a portion of the crown by suppressing lateral branches.

lion tailing—Poor pruning practice in which an excessive number of branches are thinned from the inside and lower part of specific limbs or a tree crown, leaving mostly terminal foliage. Results in poor branch taper, poor wind load distribution, and a higher risk of branch failure.

live crown ratio—The ratio of the height of the crown containing live foliage to the overall height of the tree.

mature trees—Trees that have reached at least 75 percent of their typical final height and spread.

method—A procedure or process for achieving an objective.

parent branch or stem—A tree trunk or branch from which other branches or shoots grow.

peeling—The removal of dead frond bases without damaging living trunk tissue at the point they make contact with the trunk.

petiole—Stalk or support axis of a leaf.

permanent branches (permanent limbs)—In structural pruning of young trees, branches that will be left in place, often forming the initial scaffold framework of a tree.

photosynthesis—Process in green plants (and in algae and some bacteria) by which light energy is used to form glucose (chemical energy) from water and carbon dioxide.

phytotoxic—Term to describe a compound that is poisonous to plants.

pollarding—Specialty pruning technique in which a tree with a large-maturing form is kept relatively short. Starting on a young tree, internodal cuts are made at a chosen height, resulting in the development of callus knobs at the cut height. Requires regular (usually annual) removal of the sprouts arising from the cuts.

pruning—Removing branches (or occasionally roots) from a tree or other plant using approved practices, to achieve a specified objective.

raising—Selective pruning to provide vertical clearance; also known as lifting.

reaction zone—Natural boundary formed chemically within a tree to separate damaged wood from existing healthy wood. Important in the process of compartmentalization.

reducing—Pruning to decrease height or spread on entire tree or one section; also referred to as reduction or reduction pruning.

reduction cut (drop-crotch cut, lateral cut)—Pruning cut that reduces the length of a branch or stem back to a lateral branch large enough to assume apical dominance—typically at least one-third of the diameter of the cut stem.

removal cut (thinning cut)—Cut that removes a branch at its point of origin. Collar cut.

restoring—The process of pruning to improve the structure, form, and appearance of trees that have been improperly trimmed, vandalized, or damaged.

scaffold limb—A limb or branch that is among the largest diameter on the tree and will remain on the tree perhaps to maturity.

shoot—New stem or branch growth on a plant.

specifications—Detailed plans, requirements, and statements of particular procedures and/or standards used to define and guide work.

stem—Woody structure bearing foliage and buds that gives rise to other stems (branches).

starch—Chain of sugar molecules linked together that serves as a form of energy storage in plants.

structural pruning—Pruning to establish a strong arrangement or system of scaffold branches.

stub—Portion of a branch or stem remaining after a stub cut, branch breakage, or branch death.

subordination—Pruning to reduce the size and ensuing growth of a branch in relation to other branches or leaders.

sucker—Shoot arising from the roots. Contrast with *watersprout*.

thinning—In pruning, the selective removal of live branches to provide light or air penetration through the tree or to lighten the weight of the remaining branches.

throwline—Thin, lightweight cord attached to a throwbag or throwing ball used to set climbing or rigging lines in trees.

topping—Inappropriate pruning technique to reduce tree size. Cutting back a tree to a predetermined crown limit, often at internodes.

trunk—Stem of a tree.

union (crotch)—The junction between stem and branch or between stems.

watersprouts—Upright, epicormic shoots arising from the trunk or branches of a plant above the root graft or soil line. Incorrectly called a sucker. Contrast with *sucker*.

wound—An opening that is created when the bark of a live branch or stem is cut, penetrated, damaged, or removed.

wound dressing—Compound applied to tree wounds or pruning cuts.

Other Sources of Information

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