



# Tidying up your greenery

Barbara Andreozzi explains how and when to prune deciduous and evergreen trees.

**W**inter, when trees are dormant, is the best time to prune, especially deciduous trees.

A tree is dormant from the time their leaves drop until buds break in the spring. During this dormant period in Montana, few insects or diseases threaten to infect pruning cuts. Late winter pruning, just before spring, keeps fresh cuts exposed to the elements for only a short time. After the late winter period, a tree puts out new growth and seals the pruned cuts. Another advantage to late winter pruning is the ease of seeing the woody structure without leaves obstructing the view.

Most deciduous trees benefit from winter pruning to get rid of deadwood, poorly placed branches that may rub against others or branches that interfere with pedestrians ability to walk safely under the tree. Always remember you are trying to develop a strong

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tree structure when pruning. It is critical to cut close to the branch collar but not into the branch collar (at the base of the branch), or leave a stub. Making the proper cut and leaving the branch collar allows the cut to seal, which will protect tissue from decay.

Evaluate a tree and plan each pruning cut carefully.

- First remove dead or diseased branches and any branch stubs.
- Remove branches that rub on others which can cause branch wounds.
- Look at the shape of the tree and evaluate if a good leader branch is growing through the center of the entire tree.
- All branches should angle off the leader, forming a strong union. Branches forming a narrow v-shape at the trunk are weaker than those forming a wider-angle crotch. Larger pruning cuts should follow a three-cut rule to protect branches from tearing below the cut. The idea is to reduce the limb length before making the final cut.
- Make a first cut on the underside of the branch about 18 inches above where the final cut will be. Cut 1/3 of the way through the branch.
- Make a second cut about an inch above the first cut on top of the branch until the branch breaks free. The first undercut will prevent the branch from tearing down through the branch collar.
- Once the larger portion of the branch is removed, make a third and final cut just above the branch collar (remember not to leave a stub).
- Disinfect pruning tools with alcohol between each cut to avoid spreading disease.

For trees that ‘bleed’ or have free-flowing sap – maples and birch trees – it is better to prune in late spring or early summer. Also, early spring blooming trees and shrubs – lilac and chokecherry – set flower buds in the summer for the following year. These early bloomers should only be pruned just after they have bloomed to avoid cutting off next year’s flower buds.

## WINTER PRUNING OF EVERGREENS

Most evergreens require little pruning. To shape evergreens, keep the following in mind.

Spruce, Douglas fir and other fir trees have lateral or side branches that will sprout if the tips are removed. Late winter is a perfect time to prune, before new growth begins in the spring.

Pines are a little more particular. Pine trees put on a single growth at the branch tips and do not have lateral or side buds. If pines are pruned in late winter or early spring before the pine puts on new growth, you will eventually be left with dead stubs, making the pine very unsightly. Pines should only be pruned in spring after the flush of new growth and before needles have fully matured. Only prune approximately half of this year's new growth, also known as the candle of the pine, to encourage density. Don't prune farther back than the current year's growth unless the plan is to completely remove the branch.

#### TOOLS

Tree pruning requires the right tools for cuts. A good pair of pruning shears may be all that is needed

for cuts ½ inch diameter and smaller. Lopping shears provide greater leverage which is needed on branch cuts from ½ inch to about 1 ½ inches diameter. Hand saws or pruning saws are best on branch cuts over 1 inch diameter. Pole saws are handy to extend the reach to higher branches. Be careful to achieve clean cuts that will not allow water snow to linger, causing mold and decay.

#### ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

Many local MSU Extension offices offer free tree pruning workshops. There is also a free MontGuide publication called *Pruning Fruit Trees in Montana*, which illustrates branch growth and the methods of pruning. Order the guide through your local MSU Extension office, download online at ([https://store.msuextension.org/Products/Pruning-Fruit-Trees-in-Montana-MT199215AG\\_\\_MT199215AG.aspx](https://store.msuextension.org/Products/Pruning-Fruit-Trees-in-Montana-MT199215AG__MT199215AG.aspx)), or call MSU Extension Publications at (406) 994-3273. ■

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**Left: Narrow angle crotches of less than 40 degrees are weak and subject to breaking.**  
**Right: It is critical to cut close to the branch collar but not into it.**



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