February is for Pruning

It cannot be enforced enough, the importance of going outside in February to prune woody plants in the yard. Trees are especially important to tackle. In February the leaves are absent and this provides an excellent view of any tree, no matter the size.

Start by looking closely at what needs to be done. Are there any dead limbs? Are there limbs that are rubbing against other limbs? Are there any diseased limbs that should be removed? These questions represent the most important issues to look at before pruning.

If dead, diseased or rubbing limbs are present then decide who should be cutting them out? If they are high in the tree or if the tree hangs over your house or a power line then it is best to hire someone to cut them. If this is the route taken then make sure the job is done correctly. Prune out only the limbs that need pruning. Do not allow the company to leave stubs where a dead limb once grew. Don't cut healthy limbs. These same rules apply if a smaller tree allows pruning to be a do it yourself project.

If pruning is done by the homeowner then make sure to cut limbs as flush as possible with the limb they grow on. A proper cut will allow the tree to heal faster, reducing the likelihood of insect or disease entering the tree. This is another good reason why pruning should be done in February. There is a lower risk of insect or disease during the winter.

Once the tree has been relieved of the dead, diseased and damaged limbs step back and take a look at the plant. If 30% of the plant has been removed then stop. Never remove more than 30% of the plant. This prevents the tree from becoming too stressed when it begins to grow again in spring. The task of repairing the wounded cuts requires energy. This energy is produced in the leaves. Removing more of the leaf area will reduce the trees ability to heal.

If the 30% mark has not been reached then take a look at the shape of the tree. Remove any stems or branches that turn inward or hang down in the way. This will open up the plant and

allow for better air movement decreasing disease pressure. Again, once 30% of the tree has been cut, stop. Take a little extra time to look for insect damage such as scale. Scale insects enjoy attaching themselves to fruit trees and magnolias so pay close attention on these species. If scale is present apply horticulture oil to the wood, suffocating the scale before it has a chance to become active in warmer weather.

Although it may seem too cold to get the task of pruning done, there is always a day that provides an opportunity. February is the time to check off that task.

Source: Starbuck, Christopher J. Pruning and Care of Shade Trees. G6866. University of Missouri Extension. Rev. October 2004

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