

Dormant Trees Provide a Good Opportunity for Pruning

Most trees can be pruned year around as long as they are pruned carefully and correctly. However there are some very compelling reasons to have your deciduous trees pruned when they are dormant (*when the leaves are gone and the tree is less active*).

There are biological reasons for pruning when the tree is dormant. They have to do with the loss of foliage which produces sugar for the tree to live on and the storage of this sugar for tree use. Basically, there is less loss of important sugars during dormant pruning. There are also considerations of disrupting hormone distributions in the tree at other times of the year that are not as strong in the winter. It requires energy for a tree to begin the process of closing off a wound to stop decay, there is less competition for the energy resources when other tree activities have slowed down.

There are health reasons for pruning when the tree is dormant. Bacterial and Fungal diseases are much less likely to infect a fresh cut on a tree in the winter. There is little or no insect activity in the winter, so fresh cuts don't attract damaging insects like they can other times of the year.

There are practical reasons for pruning when the tree is dormant. When a tree's leaves are gone it is much easier to see the tree's structure and inspect for flaws and weakly growing branches. It is easier to get an overall view of the tree's structure and growth patterns and therefore determine where to make cuts that will correct weak growth patterns and balance the tree.

A common question is; How can you tell what is dead and what is living when you prune a tree with no leaves? Most trees have very obvious buds on living branches that will turn into leaves in the late spring. Branches that were dead during the summer do not have buds during the winter. Also, on dead branches the bark will look dried and crinkly; it usually changes color which makes it easy to determine what is dead and what is living. However, a branch that was alive during the summer but dies during the winter may not be easily recognized until the following summer. Any professional arborist should be able to tell the difference between dead and alive branches when the tree is dormant, and you can too if you take some time to observe trees.

It is best to have your trees pruned by a professional, "Certified Arborist" who knows tree biology. There is a great deal of damage being done to trees by so-called professionals who claim to be knowledgeable but aren't. Years of experience do not always add up to correct knowledge. Trees that have been damaged by severe or incorrect pruning may grow back, but they may never recover structurally, and they may die many years before their time from various complications caused by the improper pruning.

Here are some things you should know when hiring an arborist to prune your trees. Cutting trees causes a certain amount of damage to them and possible exposure to diseases, an arborist should always have a good reason for pruning a tree. The arborist should make only the cuts necessary and make cuts correctly. There are two important considerations when pruning, pruning for the trees health and pruning to help the tree develop a strong structure. (*There are other reasons for pruning which I will not discuss now, such as space issues- keeping trees out of wires and off of buildings; artistic pruning such as Bonsai pruning and pruning to maintain a view.*) Pruning for health and structure should be the most important considerations for any pruning.

Branches that are unhealthy, dead or dieing, or growing incorrectly should be eliminated from the tree on a regular basis to help the tree maintain healthy foliage. The structure of the tree should be examined on a regular basis and if necessary some branches should be reduced or eliminated to help the tree develop a

strong structure that will hold up to Colorado's weather. Branches should not be eliminated without there being a good reason for their elimination, the tree needs as much healthy foliage as possible to make sugar so it has the energy to grow and carry on all of its healthy functions.

Much of the bad pruning is easy to spot because so many branches have been removed or the trees growth pattern has been radically altered. However, one type of incorrect pruning to watch out for is what some arborists call "Thinning". They may say your tree is too thick and needs to be thinned or cleaned out. They will indiscriminately remove the smaller branches on the inside of the tree. This type of pruning may not look as bad as a tree that has been topped but it can be very damaging to the tree and cause problems in the trees growth structure and health (*I have written an article on this topic that can be accessed at my website*).

To help avoid damaging your trees by bad pruning consider these rules:

1. Always hire a Certified Arborist or Board Certified Master Arborist and check their credentials (*they will have a certification number that can be verified at www.isa-arbor.com*).
2. When discussing pruning, ask the arborist to explain their general plan for pruning. Branches should not be reduced or eliminated without a good reason.
3. The arborist should inspect the tree for weak branch unions and other defects while in the tree and final decisions about pruning should be made at that time by the arborist.
4. Trees are an important part of your landscape that requires care and maintenance. When properly cared for, trees can provide many benefits to your property as well as increase property value.