Pruning Young Trees*

Pruning a young tree saves money. Removing small branches is fairly easy compared with waiting until limbs are large, when pruning can be costly and a bigger risk to the tree. Correctly pruning a tree when it's young will help it develop a strong, well-balanced crown. Prune to have the following:

A. Branches that are well-attached to the trunk

Branches with a branch bark ridge (bark pushed out at the point where the branch attaches to the trunk) are less likely to break off in wind or heavy ice or snow. Branches that are less than half the diameter of the trunk are also less likely to break off in storms.

B. One central leader

Most trees will be strongest if they have one central leader (instead of multiple). Unless your tree is an arborvitae or fruit tree, choose one leader to keep, and prune off the competitors.

C. Good spacing between branches

Vertical space between branches should eventually be 12 inches for fruit or small-statured trees and 18 inches for medium- and large-stature deciduous trees. Try to space branches equally around the tree.
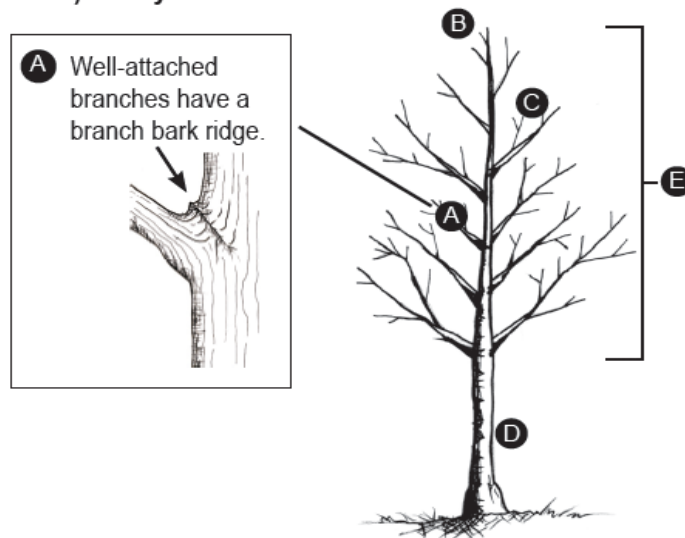
D. Enough clearance between the ground and first branch

As a tree grows taller, branches remain at the same height. Branches located low on the trunk may get in the way of sidewalk paths or lawn mowing as the tree gets bigger. Over time, gradually remove low branches.

E. Good crown height

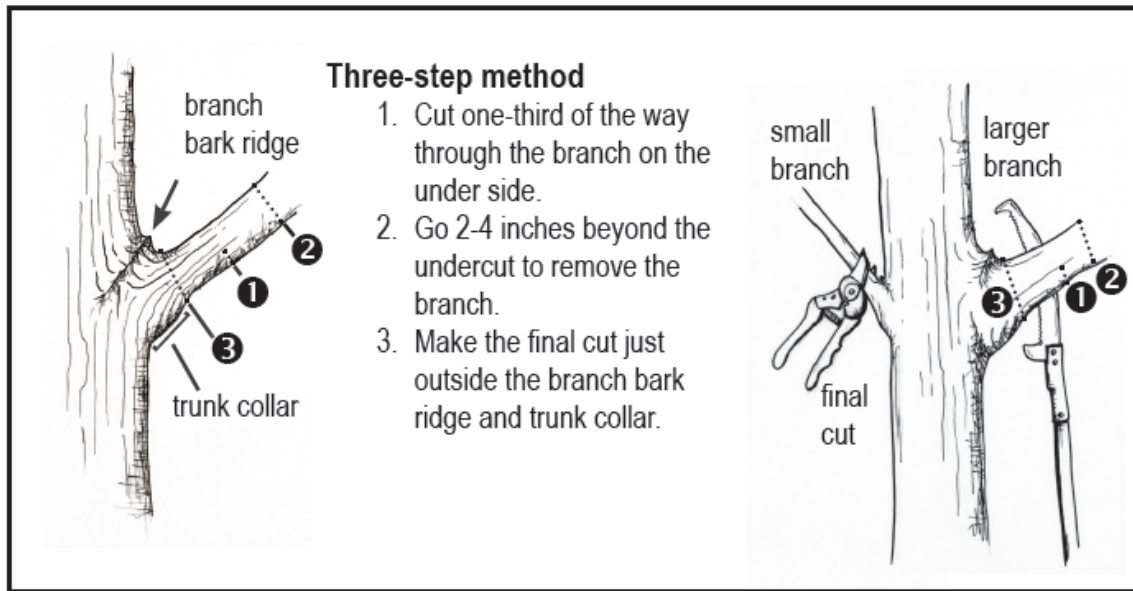The crown of a deciduous tree should be at least 60 percent of the total tree height.

Do not remove more than 25 percent of the tree's live branches (and therefore leaves) at any one time.

A Well-attached branches have a branch bark ridge.

Where to Cut

Support the branch with one hand while you make the cut to prevent the bark from ripping. If the branch is too large to support, use the three-step method (see details below).

For the final cut, look for the branch bark ridge and trunk collar. Begin the cut just outside of the branch bark ridge, and angle down away from the trunk. Stay close to the trunk collar without cutting into it (see images below).

branch bark ridge

Three-step method

1. Cut one-third of the way through the branch on the under side.
2. Go 2-4 inches beyond the undercut to remove the branch.
3. Make the final cut just outside the branch bark ridge and trunk collar.

trunk collar

small branch

larger branch

final cut

Pruning Tools

Hand pruner—bypass type

Lopper—bypass type

B E S T

Bypass blades cross each other like those in a scissors.

Hand saw

Pole saw or pruner

Pruning saws usually have curved blades with teeth that cut when you pull.

O K

Bow saws can be used, but it is often difficult to fit the saw between branches to make the correct pruning cut.