

The Proper Way to Prune

Introduction

Citizens of Woodcreek,

We are very pleased to be able to post the following article authored by our Beautification Committee Chairperson, Nan Booth Simson, Landscape Architect. We hope that this is the beginning of many articles that she will create to inform us of the proper techniques and organic remedies that are available for many of the problems that we have experienced resulting from the past drought conditions as well as a learning tool for all of us to use for improving the curb appeal of the entire City. Nan has a vision that we all share in wanting to have the City of Woodcreek become a model community here in the Wimberley Valley. By taking proper care of our trees, shrubs and plants we not only beautify our community, but ensure that our property values will be maintained and continue to grow.

Recognizing that our oak trees are one of the most precious resources that provides the City of Woodcreek with the largest portion of its charm, we remind all residents of Woodcreek Oak Wilt Ordinance No. 05-92A. This ordinance is very broad in its language, but simply stated a tree trimming permit is required for any trees trimmed, pruned or removed.

Specifically, Ordinance 05-92A states:

“SECTION 1. TREE-TRIMMING PERMIT REQUIRED

No person, individual, firm, corporation, contractor, landscape contractor, tree trimmer, builder, utility service or any other type of business entity shall trim, prune or remove any tree within the City without having first obtained a permit from the City Administrator. Permits shall be issued without charge. Permits shall be effective for thirty (30) days from the date of issuance and shall apply only to the lot or parcel of land for which it is issued. The permit shall be posted in a place where it can be seen from the nearest street while the work is in process”

The Oak Wilt Ordinance is posted on the City Ordinances link of the City’s website (www.CityofWoodcreek.com) and there is also a link to the no cost Permit Application that a resident can download, fill out, and turn in to City Hall.

The colors of spring are signaling nature’s rebirth from the doldrums of winter. Happy and safe gardening.

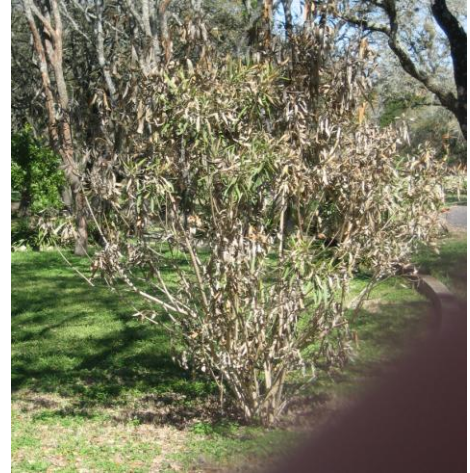
Eric C. Eskelund – Mayor, Dr. Sally Caldwell – Mayor Pro-tem, Council Members Melinda Gumbert, Kay Henderson, Brent Pulley, Jeff Rasco and Pieter Sybesma - City Administrator

The Proper Way to Prune

by Nan Booth Simpson, Landscape Architect

This winter has been hard on our Hill Country landscapes. Now is a good time to evaluate the plants in your garden. Some may look dead, but many of them can be renewed if they are pruned correctly.

For example, if you have an oleander that looks like this, you are not alone! The 11° low temperature we experienced in February hit most oleanders hard. Anytime the temperature dips below 20°F, and the freeze lasts longer than eight hours, many plants will freeze back to the roots. While most plants will begin to recover in late March or early April, plants such as palms may not begin their recovery process until temperatures have reached 80° to 100° during the daytime.



Freeze Damaged Oleander



Cut all dead fronds from a Sego Palm. It will probably begin putting on new growth next summer.

So, if you are considering replacing all your plants that appear dead, the consensus among professionals is to wait until spring (or even summer) to observe if and where the new buds will appear. You can do a scratch test to look for green beneath the bark, but even if there is no life to be found, you may still be surprised where re-growth will occur once the temperatures are warmer. Do not remove dead branches until winter has passed. The dead wood can serve as insulation to protect the plant from further damage. (And don't count on frost-free nights until the mesquite and pecan trees begin putting out their leaves!)

Pruning Evergreen Shrubs That Have Suffered from Frost

Once the chance of frost is behind us, prune the oleanders and other effected shrubs back as far as you find freeze damage along the stems/branches. Healthy stems will be firm and green. If the plant is unattractive after you have cut it back, you may correctly decide to simply cut all or most of the branches to the ground. This allows the shrub to put out all new shoots from the roots and result in a

more natural-looking plant. (See the section on Renewal Pruning below) If any plant you cut back to the ground does not put out new growth, you can be sure it was root-dead and was the wrong species or cultivar for this region.

If you discover that a plant is dead, replace it with a different, more winter-hardy species. For the past several years our winters have been so mild that gardeners have been tempted to "push the envelope" and plant such semi-tropical species as bottlebrush Mexican heather. They forgot that only three oleander cultivars ('Hardy Pink', 'Hardy Red' and 'Double Yellow') are sufficiently cold-tolerant to be reliable in the Hill Country. This year reminded us (once again) that there's nothing between Texas and the North Pole but barbed wire fences!

Pruning Shrubs

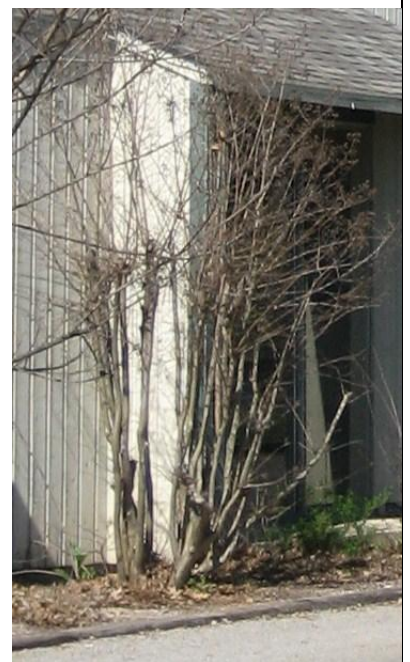
Pruning should be a routine part of landscape maintenance and not delayed until the garden is overgrown. Pruning is both an art and a science. Unfortunately, few people know how to do it correctly. A drive through Woodcreek will provide examples of trees topped and shrubs sheared into balls and boxes or mangled beyond recognition. It makes me heartsick to see what *Southern Living* magazine calls "crepe murder." I cannot imagine whose bad advice made people think they should cut crepe myrtles back to the nubbins every year? Such pruning not only leaves crepe myrtles ugly beyond redemption, but also it leaves them more prone to disease.

When to Prune



This Crepe Myrtle has been preserved to grow to its fullest potential.

I believe in lightly pruning shrubs every year, but timing is a critical factor for some flowering plants such as oleanders and climbing roses that set their flower buds on the previous season's growth. These plants should be pruned immediately after blooming. Plants that produce summer flowers, such as shrub roses, abelia, crepe myrtle and



This Crepe Myrtle has been irreparably damaged by poor pruning.

rose of Sharon are usually pruned while dormant or just before the spring growth flush. Pinching new spring or early summer growth on plants that flower on subsequent shoot growth will encourage more flower bud formation for next year's flower display.

Most evergreens such as boxwood, ligustrum, juniper, podocarpus, Texas sage and wax myrtle can be pruned anytime except late fall when pruning may stimulate an additional flush of shoot growth. These tender shoots are easily damaged, even by a light frost. This is particularly true of plants that are marginally hardy. If in doubt about cold susceptibility, it is best to delay pruning until just before growth begins in the spring. Pruning wounds heal most rapidly if pruning is conducted just before the spring growth flush. A closed wound is more aesthetically pleasing and more difficult for insects, diseases and decay organisms to enter.

Why Prune?

It is always appropriate to remove crossed, rubbing or broken branches, It is also important to immediately remove dead, diseased and insect-infested plant parts before they spread the problems to other portions of the plant or to neighboring plants. Rapid-response pruning (and discarding the debris in plastic) can be an effective alternative to spraying insecticides if the infestation is small and localized. Check plants often to detect a disease or an infestation in the early stages. Pruning for the purpose of compensating for root loss at the time of planting is no longer a recommended practice. Wait about a year after planting a new tree or shrub to begin pruning for appropriate form and structure. Unwanted stems should be removed at ground level or just beyond the place where they join older stems. Do not leave unsightly "stubs" and don't attempt to dramatically alter the shrub's natural form.

Heading-back

To head-back growth in an established plant, make the pruning cut so that the outermost bud left on the branch is pointing in the direction you want the branch to grow. Always cut quickly and cleanly. It's better to perform small annual cuts than to wait until a plant is out of hand and take a chance on hopelessly ruining its shape. Unless there has been freeze damage, a rule of thumb is not to prune more than a third of the existing foliage and to prune stems carefully to distribute removal evenly for a balanced look.

I prefer to delay routine pruning until a sunny day in late March early April. At that time you will see the new buds on the plants and will know how far to cut them back. Early spring is a good time to

decide which plants can be salvaged and which should be removed. Huge shrubs with thick trunks cannot simply be cut back to stumps. Shrubs that have been allowed to overgrow their space or have been pruned incorrectly for years will probably never become attractive again. It's better to take them out and start over, choosing a plant that will not grow too large for its location.

However, it is possible redeem some poorly pruned plants. One of my clients in Dallas had a pair of large yaupon trees flanking her entry walk. They had been pruned by her maintenance company into ridiculous-looking "lollipops." By removing some of the interior branches to open up the canopy and allowing the outer branches to grow naturally, within two years we had returned them to handsome, natural-looking trees.



A homeowner pruned this large Texas sage into a tree-form. With time and patience, it can be softened into a pleasing, naturalistic shape and encouraged to fill-out more fully



This mountain laurel would become more graceful if it is pruned into a small tree.

Some overgrown old shrubs such as red-tip photinia, ligustrum, mountain laurel, viburnum and Burford holly can be transformed into attractive small trees. If the plant has multiple stems, select a few heavy upright branches to serve as trunks and cut the rest to the ground. Then start at the bottom, exposing each trunk carefully by cutting off lower branches, making the cuts close to the trunk. Stand back and look, then continue limbing-up the lower branches until the overall shape is pleasing. To "finish" the landscape, plant a ground cover under the tree.

Renewal Pruning



Leggy Nandina

Another way to rejuvenate plants in an overgrown landscape is to cut the entire plant to the ground. This method works well on fountain-shaped shrubs that tend to put on all their growth at the top. I've been known to cut leggy old specimens of oleander, abelia, nandina and primrose jasmine all the way to the ground, allowing the entire plant to regenerate from the roots.

Thereafter, the homeowner should remove a third of the growth each year, cutting out the oldest, woodiest



Nandina after Renewal Pruning

canes. Such pruning forces plants to continually put out new growth from the bottom, keeping the plants fuller and more naturally shaped.

Pruning Trees

First a word of caution! Do not prune your oak trees from January through May, when new cuts will attract insects that carry the fungi that cause oak wilt. The least hazardous periods for pruning oak trees are during the coldest days in winter and extended hot periods in mid- to late summer. Regardless of season, all pruning cuts or other wounds to oak trees, including freshly cut stumps and damaged surface roots, should be treated immediately with pruning paint to prevent exposure to contaminated insect vectors. Moreover, transporting unseasoned firewood from diseased oaks is a potential means of spreading the oak wilt fungus. Don't store firewood near healthy oak trees.

Residents are reminded that a no cost tree trimming permit is required prior to any tree trimming done on their property. The Oak Wilt Ordinance is posted on the City Ordinances link of the City's website (www.CityofWoodcreek.com). There is also a link to the no cost Permit Application that a resident can download, complete, and turn in to City Hall.

Never "top" any tree in your landscape. Instead of topping, thin the tree to a network of even, regularly spaced branches. If you must reduce the height of a tree, do it over a period of time. Remove rubbing and crossing branches, suckers, weak branches and any broken or diseased limbs. Always remove branches back to the origin of growth. Make the cut almost flush with the branch from which it sprang, cutting just outside the ring

that separates the branch from the trunk (called the branch collar). Disinfect your cutting tool with a solution made of one cup of bleach in a gallon of water before continuing making the next cut. If you're removing a large branch, three cuts are needed to ensure that the bark won't tear. The first cut should be from the bottom, just beyond the place where the final cut will be made. The second should be made from the top to remove the branch. The third and final cut is made to remove the stump just beyond the branch collar.

Thinning a tree is also an acceptable practice if it is to provide good air circulation, let more light through the canopy or promote evenly spaced branching patterns. Sometimes pruning is desirable for ridding trees of unsightly ball moss. This grayish-green "pincushion-like" growth that occurs on the limbs of a number of Texas shade trees is not harmful to a healthy, actively growing tree. An epiphytic member of the bromeliad family, ball moss derives its nutrition from the air, not from the tree. However, trees heavily infested with ball moss have been observed to undergo a slow decline, because the moss can smother lower limbs of a tree by shading out the buds. (Since ball moss is particularly prevalent in live oak trees, I'll discuss ball moss and mistletoe removal in another essay later in the year.)

Most people don't have the proper tools and ladders to safely prune large trees. A professional arborist may not only prolong the life of your trees, but also save you from a stay in the hospital. If a tree must be removed, the International Society of Arboriculture recommends that you negotiate a written contract that specifies how the tree is to be removed, where the wood will be taken and who is liable in case of damage. There is some disagreement about painting pruning cuts/wounds on trees. I don't ordinarily advocate it, but the immediate use of wound paint when pruning both the branches and roots of oak trees is definitely recommended by Texas arborists.

Dead or unhealthy trees are a liability. It's probably time to consult a professional arborist if (1) the tree is leaning, (2) there's evidence of root rot and/or the trunk has hollows or deep open cracks, (3) there has been improper pruning in the past, or (4) there has been storm damage or construction injury. He or she is the person most qualified to determine if the tree can be saved. Should the tree pose a danger to a house, power lines, cars or people, let it go and plant a replacement.

Proper Plant Selection

Proper plant selection can eliminate most pruning. If you need a columnar plant or a low, wide-spreading plant, choose a species that has a natural tendency to grow into the form you desire. Unfortunately, plants are frequently placed in the landscape according to their size and shape as they come from the nursery, not the height and width they will attain in 10 years. For instance, if homeowners select (or inherit) photinia as foundation plants, they can expect to spend the rest of their lives hacking on them since these plants naturally grow to 25-30' tall. Utilizing a dwarf or compact variety of plant in the same location will save time, grief and money. So, read the label or consult reliable nursery personnel to find out how big each little plant will become!