

Of Shape & Shade Pruning for picture-perfect treescapes

By Nancy Myers

Few things have more residential appeal than a lush tree-lined street, and when planted properly, trees around the home are beneficial in countless ways. They add beauty to the landscape, value to a home and often enough shade to provide a much-needed respite from a soaring summer heat. To optimize the health and structure of the trees, be diligent about trimming and pruning — and act now.

“If you want a tree to really flourish in the spring, trim more in the winter,” says Pat Flynn of Dallas Arbor Tech. Crucial though the timing may be, it’s equally important to enlist the services of qualified, capable professionals to do the job and to understand the process, as arboriculture, the cultivation of trees, is both a science and an art.

Basically, professional tree trimming and pruning involves the removal of dead, dying, damaged and/or diseased limbs.

The process is often deemed desirable or necessary to improve tree structure, enhance vigor or maintain safety. However, many skilled arborists go above and beyond, artfully shaping the limbs, foliage and features to complement a home’s style.

Properly trimmed and pruned trees should retain a natural appearance, with the density of foliage consistent. Specialists are schooled in recognizing characteristic branch growth of specific tree species, sunlight requirements and branch shedding patterns, both of freestanding trees and those growing in clusters.

Words of wisdom

Alan Johnson, vice president and certified arborist at Holcomb Tree Service, says, “The first thing February brings to mind is the crape myrtle and any type of ornamental tree. For live oaks and red oaks we’re closing in on the end of the season. It’s a great time to prune fruit trees like pear and peach, to make sure you get good bloom for the next year.”

“It’s an ideal time to start deep-root fertilizing trees,” he adds. “The root system never goes dormant, so the tree’s constantly taking up nutrients. So, if you fertilize during February or March you’ll enhance the health and vigor, seeing the beneficial aspects come springtime. What happens in the spring is you get the warmer temperatures, and funguses and diseases start to ‘spore out.’” Holcomb is a family run business that’s been around since 1956.

Steve Houser, a consulting arborist with Arborological Services, Inc., routinely covers several key topics and tips in his pruning presentations. “In the winter months, try to avoid pruning the bleeders or trees that bleed out sap. The three species of these found in the Dallas area are birch (which we don’t see a lot of here), walnut and maple, both of which come in several varieties,” he says.

“The next most important thing is making the proper cut from the proper angle, so that it can heal properly,” Houser adds. “February 15 is a statewide cutoff time, when we want to avoid pruning red oaks and live oaks and any species within these families. Avoid pruning those varieties of oaks from February 15 till June 15.”

Some experts disagree on the timeline. “The one thing is that you shouldn’t do is trim oaks between February 1 and June 1,” says Brad Ridenhour, owner of Dallas Tree Surgeons. “But it’s only a two-week swing (from the 15th-to-15th aphorism), so there’s not that much of a difference. With tree pruning, the sap runs less when it’s colder, so removal of large branches is better done during that time of year.” Ridenhour’s company has been around since 1995 and services all of Dallas and the suburbs, including McKinney, Lewisville and Flower Mound.

Troubleshooting

Whichever timeline one chooses to follow, most authorities agree on the consequences of failing to adhere to it: the dreaded oak wilt, which Houser says has “devastated areas in Austin and is growing quite a bit in our area.” Caused by the fungus *ceratocystis fagacearum*, it’s a disease that invades and disables the water-conducting system in susceptible trees. One of the most destructive tree afflictions in the United States, it’s even impacting the economy through losses in property values.

“To prevent oak wilt is to not prune at the incorrect time of the year,” says Mauro Torres, owner of Latinos Tree Care since 2003. “Either do it within the deadline or wait till the season is over.”

If it’s necessary to prune during the “off season,” due to city notices or neighbors’ requests, Houser says to simply treat any cuts over an inch or around an inch in diameter. He recommends amber shellac. “My personal favorite,” he says. Another option is black pruning paint. “This would be second best; not ideal, but it still protects the tree.”

A fine line

How much is too much? Houser says a good rule of thumb is to never remove more than 25 percent of foliage in any given year. Most tree professionals are likeminded in this respect. “We work ‘with’ the tree, not against it,” Flynn notes.

While scheduling the winter trimming, think ahead about other spring plans. Many companies offer full landscaping services in addition to tree and shrub maintenance, and will work to fulfill homeowners’ needs. Patios, borders, walkways and outdoor lighting can be incorporated into the package, turning the entire property into a showcase that complements the well-cared-for urban woodland. Who says you can’t improve on nature?