

# How to Prune Young Shade Trees



from the **TREE CITY USA®  
BULLETIN**

*What you do to your tree in the first few years of its life will affect its shape, strength, and even its life span. After selecting the right tree for the site and carefully planting it, early pruning is the most important thing you can do for a young tree. Proper pruning will save you money and give you safer, healthier, more beautiful, and easier-to-maintain trees.*

## Pruning for Strength and Form

### At Planting Time...

Prune modestly when transplanting a new tree. The immediate objective is to strengthen and expand the root system, which is helped by leaving intact as much of the leaf surface as possible. Only damaged or dead limbs should be removed.

After the first year, pruning should begin in earnest. Pruning with strength and form as the objective is the best way to avoid weak branches and prevent expensive corrections later on.

### Temporary Branches

Branches below the lowest permanent branch can protect young bark from injury from sun scald and add taper and strength to the trunk. Particularly in lawn plantings where lower limbs do not block passage or tempt vandals, the limbs may be left for 3 to 4 years after planting. Then remove them over the next 2 to 3 years. Don't let temporary branches become large and vigorous.



### Multiple Leaders

Protect the leader from competition. In trees with two equally vigorous leaders, remove the one that has a crook or other defects, or that creates a lopsided appearance.

### Thinning and Spacing

Most trees benefit from thinning – removing some of the limbs that compete for space and light. A good rule of thumb is to try to maintain evenly spaced laterals, 8 to 12 inches apart in a young tree. Over-pruning can damage or even kill your tree. Always keep at least two-thirds of your tree as live crown.

### Rubbing Branches

Branches that rub against each other result in wounds, decay, and notches. Remove one of the offending branches.

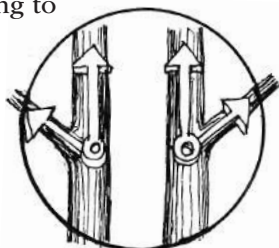
### Watersprouts and Suckers

These can occur at the base or inside the crown. They are rapidly growing, weakly attached, and upright. It is best to remove them as soon as possible after the first year.

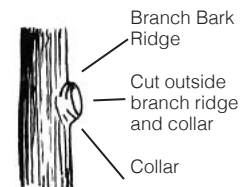
## Keys to Good Pruning

1. Prune early in the tree's life so pruning wounds are small.

2. Identify the best leader and lateral branches before you begin pruning and remove any defective parts before pruning to form. Try to find and use lateral branches that form "10 o'clock" or "2 o'clock" angles with the trunk.



3. When you prune back to the trunk or a larger limb, branches too small to have formed a collar (swollen area at base) should be cut close. For larger branches, cut just outside the branch bark ridge and collar. Do not leave a protruding stub.



4. When shortening a small branch, make the cut at a lateral bud or another lateral branch. Favor a bud that will produce a branch that will grow in a desired direction (usually outward). The cut should be sharp and clean, and made at a slight angle about 1/4 inch beyond the bud.

