

There are many “myths” about tree pruning that can confuse even the sharpest consumer. In this second part of the two-part series on tree pruning, we’ll set the record straight on a few of the most widespread myths.

MYTH 1: “Topping a tree makes it safer.”

As a professional arborist, I am frequently asked to top or reduce a tree’s height to prevent it from failing in a storm. This *may temporarily* help reduce the chances of failure; but it will also create more long-term problems for the tree and its surroundings – some which may be uncorrectable. Topping a tree reduces its ability to produce energy through photosynthesis. It also creates large zones of decay in the upper portion of the canopy. It will trigger re-growth that is denser, grows at a faster rate and is attached more weakly than their parent stems. All of this adds up to more maintenance and liability. Topping is a severe practice that should be reserved only for extreme circumstances.

MYTH 2: “Severe pruning invigorates a weak tree.”

This myth likely yields from the thick, dense foliage that often grows after severe pruning is performed, perhaps making the tree more beautiful than it’s ever been – and then it dies the next year. How can this be?

Trees store energy in many of their cells for later use. When a tree becomes distressed to the point that it is balancing on the fence of life and death, it draws on this stored energy as a last attempt at life. The stored energy is mainly used to produce more leaves that are often larger and greener. The trees do this to try to produce more energy. If unsuccessful, the tree has zero resources to draw upon and dies.

MYTH 3: “Tree paint should always be used to seal a cut.”

In most cases, tree paint should *not* be applied after pruning. Studies have shown that tree paint or sealant does not increase a tree’s ability to seal a wound or slow decay. Some have even been proven to be harmful to a tree and can even speed up decay by sealing in moisture and protecting decay-causing organisms from the elements.

MYTH 4: “Always prune in the spring (or fall).”

Generally, if pruning is for cosmetic or routine maintenance, then planning according to best timing for a given tree type is the best path – certain types of trees should only be pruned under certain conditions and certain times of the year. The exception to this rule is when deadwood is being removed or if a hazardous situation arises – in which case safety becomes the primary factor.

Some tree types like Maples, Birches and Elms should not be pruned during late winter or early spring. Since sap flow is greater during this period, it may be unsightly or disruptive to an area of the yard. More importantly, certain diseases and insects also affect these tree types. Pruning during this time may increase vulnerability and elevate the impact of such afflictions.

Trees like the Crape Myrtle have been planted further north in climates that are stretching their ability to survive the cold winters. Pruning of live branches from October through December may reduce their cold hardiness.

Pruning of certain flowering trees like Crabapple, Flowering Cherry, Pear, Peach, Dogwood trees and others should be avoided after July. After that time flower buds become set and pruning will affect their survival and display for the following season. It is also usually recommended to not prune just before or during flowering as well.

Disease may also be spread through pruning at the wrong time of the year. For example, pruning a Live Oak in the spring and summer will pose a greater risk of it contracted and/or spreading oak wilt. If you are unsure of the type of tree you want to prune or what ailments may be a factor for your pruning, seek a professional opinion.

This is just a quick overview of basic pruning principles and there are many more variables and disciplines to learn before one could be considered a “pro”. When in doubt, ask a tree care professional. Obviously, not every pruning job requires a professional and the savvy tree farmer can certainly try their hand at basic pruning around the yard and garden. When doing so though, please follow the instructions and heed the precautions in the operator’s manual for any equipment you might be using! In general, whenever a pruning task requires aboveground work, a professional should be contacted.

For more information on pruning techniques, refer to the American Nation Standards Institute’s (ANSI) A300 Pruning Standards.

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