

# Ornamental Trimming

arborSmith abstracts  
practical solutions to common tree problems



A small flowering tree can create an almost magical effect in a landscape garden with each season revealing a new character.

Unfortunately, this wonderful outdoor asset is often destroyed when the top and sides are sheared, leaving the tree rounded over. This practice is usually done by trimmers that do not understand how to maintain tree size *and* preserve its natural character.



Our goal in trimming small ornamental trees is not only to enhance their natural beauty but also prolong life and health. *When ornamental trees are sheared and rounded over, it often does the exact opposite of what is intended.*

- **It does NOT keep the tree smaller** because it stimulates growth at the point of the cut and shearing only stimulates growth on the outside of the plant where we want it to STOP growing. This actually causes the tree to get larger. To keep a tree small, trimming should be done throughout the whole tree, interior and exterior.

- **It does not keep the tree neat.** Rounding creates artificial manmade lines which are quickly broken by newly stimulated sprouts making the tree look messy. However, a tree that is trimmed naturally, using “varied depth cutting” or “reduction pruning” will not lose its neat appearance when it continues its
- normal growth. Our pruners and saws are **GROWTH STIMULATORS** and we must always keep that
- in mind when making a cut. *“Is this where I want to stimulate growth?”*

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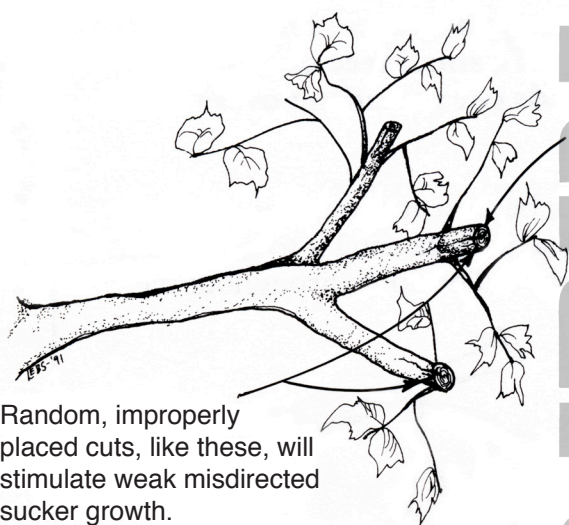
Shearing will send out unsightly sprout growth not long after trimming, it can happen within just a few weeks time.

- **It is NOT healthy for the tree.** Trimming stimulates growth ONLY at the location of the cut, not throughout the tree. Rounding over or shearing creates stubs that will die back and thus create hosting places for insects and diseases that can infect and create rot in the tree.

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**The magic of proper reduction pruning accomplish 3 more things with fewer**

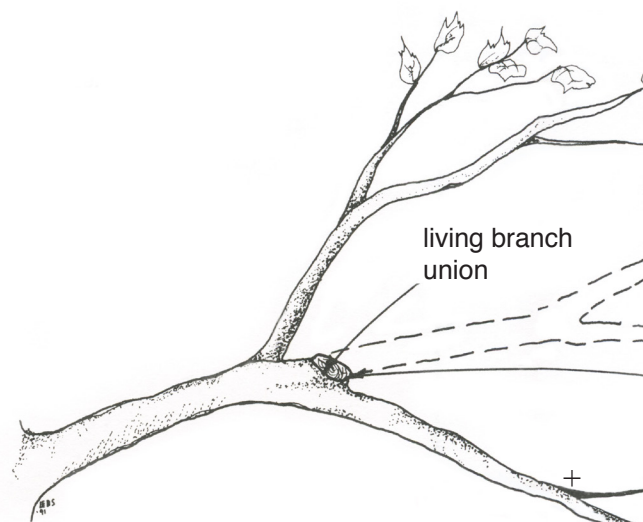
- stimulate growth throughout the tree
- open the canopy so light filters through
- diminish suckery crossing branches to reduced air circulation



This stub will promote diseases that can infect and rot the tree and could host damaging insects.

Random, improperly placed cuts, like these, will stimulate weak misdirected sucker growth.

**Rounded Over Branch Stems**



**Properly Trimmed Branch using a “reduction cut”**

## So...how do we keep the tree at the front door from overgrowing the walk, blocking my view or just getting too big?

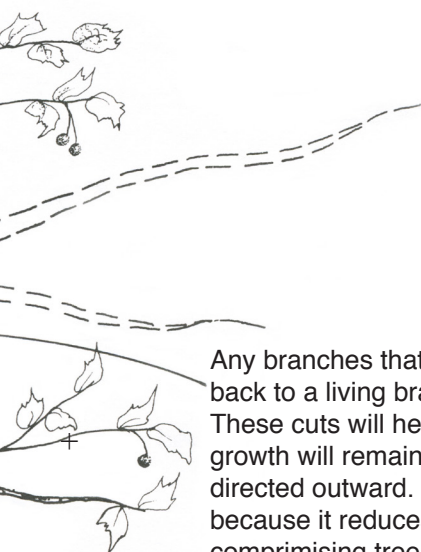
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### Steps for Proper Pruning:

- **The right sized tree for the location.** If the designer/landscape architect/tree planter has correctly sized the plant for the location, there is no need for costly and damaging size reduction pruning. The right tree in the right place really needs very little care.
- **Timing** - Generally, if trimming is done properly, flowering trees can be trimmed any time of year. However, we prefer in the winter because it is easier to see the structure when there are no leaves on the trees. When a flowering tree is trimmed properly, the flowers are preserved.
- **Sterilize trimming tools.** Unsterile trimming tools will spread infectious diseases, such as fireblight. Cutting edges on trimming tools should be sharp and clean. Sterilize using rubbing alcohol in a spray bottle. 1 part chlorine bleach to 9 parts water is also effective but very hard on your tools, your lungs, your hair and your clothes.
- **Trim all dead, diseased and broken branches.** Additional information on making proper cuts can be found in our *Tree Trimming/Pruning Abstract*.
- **Remove suckers** at the base of the tree and on the branches, annually. If this is neglected for a long period, it can destroy the value and appearance of an ornamental tree.

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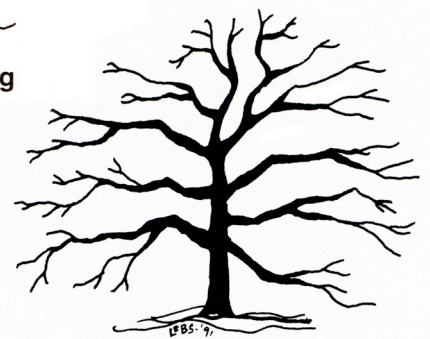
ing is that we can reduce tree size *and*  
er cuts.  
ee  
ough allowing lower branch growth to survive  
s that promote bacterial and fungal growth due



Any branches that are removed should be cut back to a living branch union. These cuts will heal properly and the tree growth will remain strong and be naturally directed outward. We call this a "reduction cut" because it reduces the size without compromising tree health.



Before Sucker Trimming



After Sucker Trimming

(over)



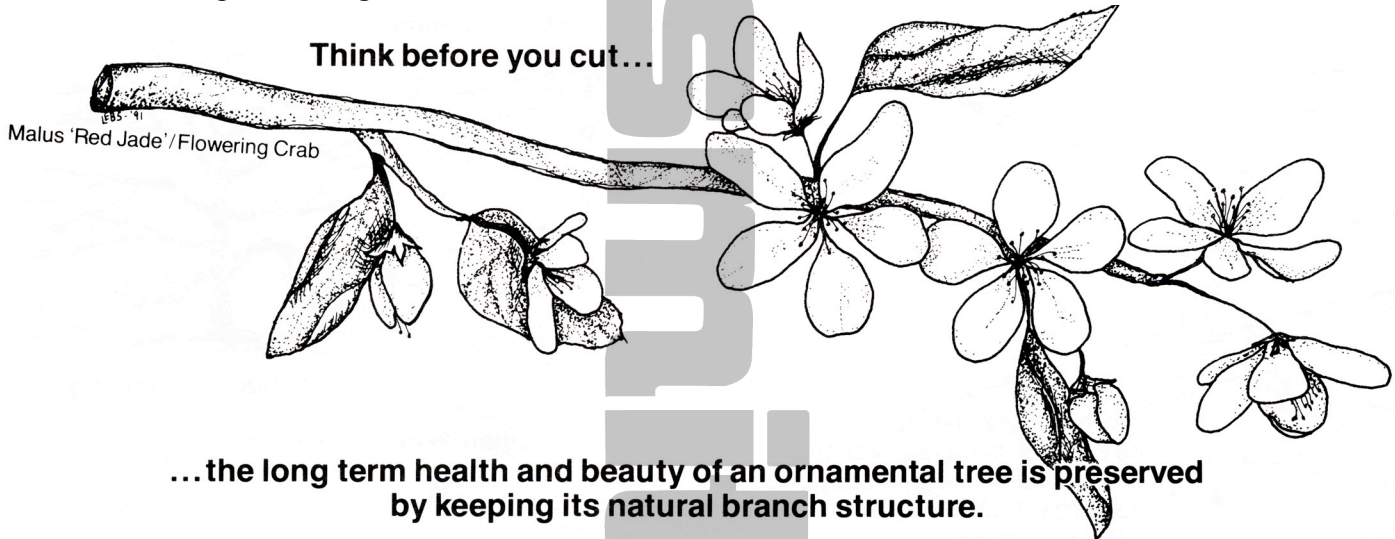
## Steps for Proper Pruning, continued:

- **Remove crossing branches** or those that point into the center of the tree or into other branches. When branches rub, one or both will eventually die. Reference illustration of *Properly Trimmed Branch*.
- **Clearance for safety.** If the branch needs to be reduced to clear it away from the building or walk, remove it back to the trunk or to a living branch at least 1/3 the diameter of the trunk, being careful not to cut it where it will die from lack of light.
- **Treatment of lower branches:**
  - 8' minimum clearance from ground for walkways, if possible.
  - 12' minimum clearance for vehicle roadways
  - Elsewhere consider the value of lower branches before cutting them off because they...
    - can never grow back
    - add beauty
    - add balance
    - frame views
    - add strength to the trunk.

Rule of thumb: The lower half of the tree should contain about 1/3 of the branches.

If lawn mowing is a problem, consider replacing the grass under the tree with another ground cover that doesn't need mowing, or better still, with mulch and wild flowers or spring bulbs. Trees are far more costly and difficult to replace than grass and the tree will be much healthier with mulch under it.

Think before you cut...



For more information and tree care help, ask for our other *Arborsmith Abstracts®* including:

- Tree Trimming/Pruning