

Tree Trimming/Pruning

How do I know my trees are being properly trimmed?

Removing dead or dying branches may be obvious, but it is only part of proper tree trimming. *ISA* Certified Arborists* prune to develop the long term strength, health, safety and beauty of a tree. There are many decisions that affect tree health that can only be made by a qualified arborist while they are aloft.

Good tree trimming must include the following:

- **Sterile trimming tools.** Unsterile trimming tools will spread infectious diseases; cutting edges should be sharp and sterile. Climbing spikes should NEVER be used when a living tree is being trimmed because they both create wounds and could spread fatal diseases. Sterilization is easily accomplished with a spray bottle of rubbing alcohol, right out of the bottle. (1 part chlorine bleach to 9 parts water is also effective but very hard on tools, and your lungs, clothes, hair and skin.)
- **Removal of broken, diseased, dead, or hazardous branches.**
Broken and dead wood are obvious symptoms that a tree needs to be trimmed in order to:
 - prevent rotting
 - inhibit insect and disease attacks
 - maintain safety
 - extend life

ISA Certified Arborists are qualified to detect and prevent most potential hazards. When identified, **large and dangerous deadwood** should always be removed and includes branches that are over 2" in diameter and/or over 4 feet in length.

Tree Topping, or indiscriminately cutting the tops out of trees, does **NOT** make a tree safe by diminishing its overall size. Instead it creates a **greater** hidden danger by promoting decay and disease and stimulating weak branch growth on top of what will become old rotting stems. Avoid anyone who does or recommends this practice.

- **Eliminating weak branch unions.** Weak branch unions must be removed, reduced, or supported with cabling or bracing. This is best done when the tree is young and checked again regularly as it develops. If it is neglected, the feasibility to correct the problem is greatly diminished and the expense for correction greatly increased.



Strong Branch Union

Notice two branches "knitting" together without conflict. This growth pattern creates strong branch unions.

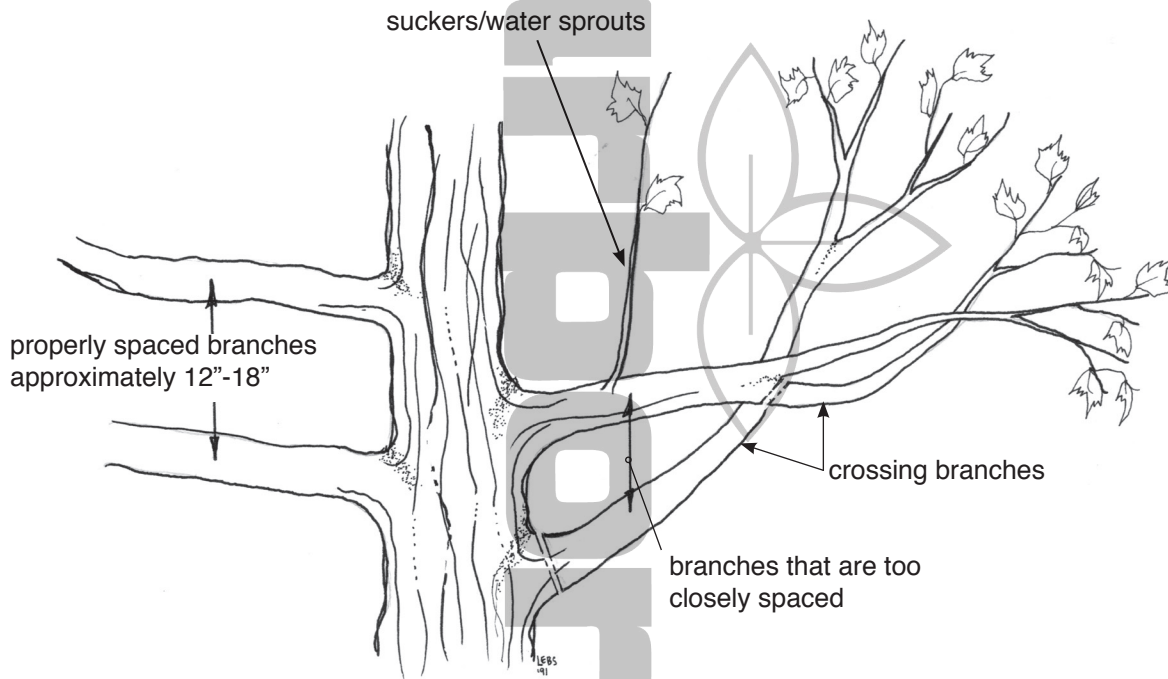


Weak Branch Union

Notice the sharp angle of attachment where bark is actually caught or imbedded between two expanding branches. This growth pattern indicates a weak branch union.

* International Society of Arboriculture

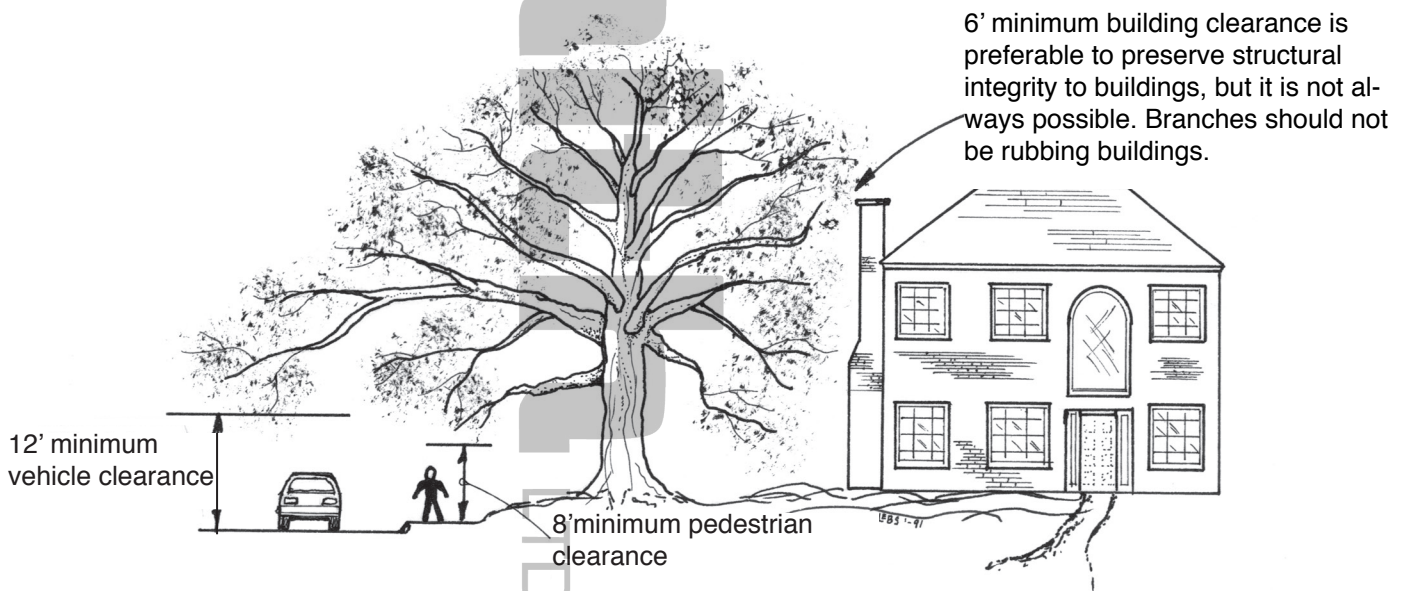
- **Removal of conflicting branches** because one or both branches will die due to rubbing. Sometimes trees are trimmed to promote more pleasing growth or allow more light to other parts of the tree or to plantings below. **Light = Food = Life**



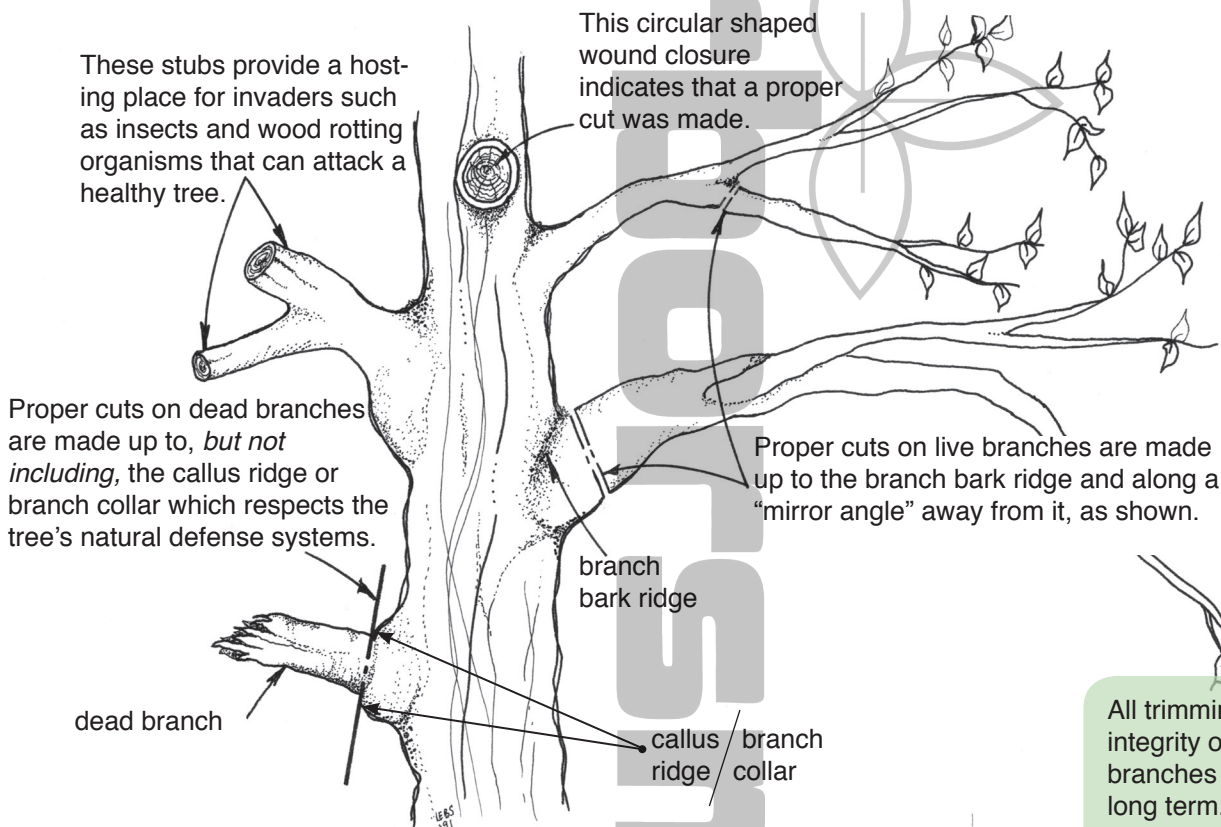
- **Avoidance of over pruning**

Over pruning is commonly done by inexperienced tree trimmers or those that do not understand that too much trimming makes a tree weaker, not stronger. A common example of this is removing all of the lower branches. Another is “stripping” off all of the smaller branches out to the branch tips called “lion’s tailing”. Both of these practices weaken the tree.

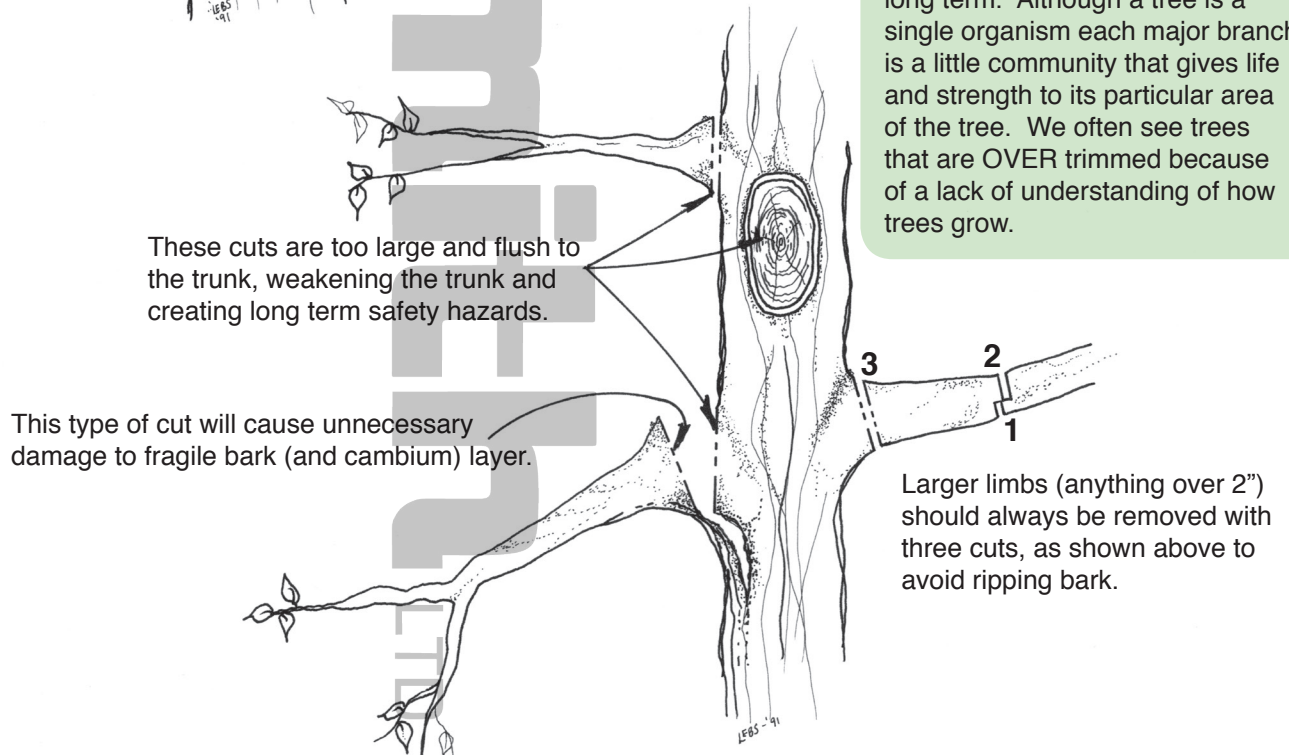
- **Maintaining human and property safety**



- Making proper cuts.** Proper pruning/trimming is one of the best things we can do for a tree, but improper trimming can do far more damage than good. A 250 year old Oak can be destroyed in an afternoon by unknowledgeable trimmers. A properly trimmed tree doesn't "look trimmed", but is a lot like a great haircut, it looks better and "happier". Although most rules have exceptions, generally, a single trimming job should never remove anymore than 33% of the living crown. *Research has shown us that painting cuts does NOT prevent decay or insect infestation, but in fact, may promote the same.*



All trimming must respect the integrity of the trunk and the branches to prevent hazards in the long term. Although a tree is a single organism each major branch is a little community that gives life and strength to its particular area of the tree. We often see trees that are OVER trimmed because of a lack of understanding of how trees grow.



- **Proper timing.** As a general rule, mature trees should be trimmed about every three to five years, with more frequent, special attention given to young developing trees or old damaged trees that have identified warning signs. The best rule of thumb is to have your trees checked by a qualified, experienced, ISA Certified Arborist once every two to three years. Autumn is a great time of year to have trees inspected for trimming needs. Generally, if trimming is done properly, they can be trimmed year-round, however, we love trimming deciduous trees in the winter because it is easier to see tree structure, less chance for planting bed or lawn damage below trees, clean-up can be easier if there is not much snow. Some guidelines for timing include the following:

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|-------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| • Elms and Oaks | Winter only, to prevent fatal diseases |
| • Evergreens | Summer only, to prevent winter burning |
| • Deciduous
(trees that lose their leaves in the autumn) | All Year, but best in the winter |

- **An understanding of tree physiology and enhancement of tree beauty**

Anyone who trims your trees should exhibit an understanding of how trees grow and respect the tree's natural systems. People who trim trees use tools that can do irreparable damage, especially if they do not understand how trees grow and "heal". Trimming equipment, like saws and pruners, promote growth whenever they are used on any woody plant. We often see trimming that promotes growth exactly where we DO NOT want it. It takes not only an understanding of the science of arboriculture but someone with a tree loving eye to appreciate and bring out the natural beauty of each individual tree. We think this is what makes Arborsmith unique.

Remember that total tree health care involves more than simply trimming. Improper treatment by people can be blamed for virtually all urban tree problems. Don't just trim your trees, take care of them for generations to come.



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

- Watering
- Mulching
- Spraying
- Fertilizing
- Cabling and Bracing
- Planting
- Shrub Trimming
- Ornamental Tree Trimming



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