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Pruning Trees Both an Art and Science

With spring rapidly approaching, we're reaching the end of the pruning season. If you haven't pruned your trees, now would be the time to do it. There are certain things to look for when pruning any tree. The first is to remove any dead wood. It can be tricky to tell whether a branch is dead, especially as the tree remains dormant. If you suspect a limb might be dead, break a piece off. If the inside is green and moist, the limb is still alive. If it is brown and dry, the limb is dead and should be removed.

Any damaged limbs can pose a hazard to people and property and should be removed as soon as possible. It is often best to wait until dry weather to prune, but damaged limbs are an urgent problem that must be taken care of immediately, or you risk liability for personal injury or property damage. Branches that rub against each other can create wounds where diseases can enter, and one or both limbs should be removed as well. If only removing one, remove the branch that is smaller at the trunk. Lastly, suckers at the base of the tree are not productive growth and should be removed. These suckers can appear directly at the base, or can grow from the roots.

The tendency when pruning limbs is to start from the top and cut downwards. On larger limbs, the weight of the branch can strip the bark from the trunk of the tree. To avoid this, you have two options. You can either reduce the size of the limb with a preliminary prune farther away from the trunk, or you can begin the prune at the trunk with an undercut. This will reduce the chance of injury and potential infection, keeping your tree healthy and looking nice.

If you're pruning fruit trees, there are certain guidelines depending on the species. Peach and nectarine trees need the most pruning, as fruit is only produced on new growth. Failing to prune peach and nectarine trees for multiple years will push fruit farther away from the center of the tree, which could result in tree limbs breaking. Apple trees tend to grow branch suckers, which grow straight up and bear no fruit, thickening the canopy and increasing the chance of disease in wet seasons. Cherry, plum, and pear trees have no extra pruning requirements, aside from those listed above.

One rule that must be followed when pruning any plant is the rule of thirds. You should not remove more than one-third of a plant's live growth in any given year. Not only will removing more than one-third of a tree or shrub's live tissue reduce its growing potential but it also creates many wounds that provide an opening for pathogens to enter. If more than one-third of the tree's limbs need to be removed, begin with the damaged or broken branches, as these are the most urgent. In subsequent years, prune for size and shape as the rule of thirds allows. Removing deadwood does not apply to the rule of thirds.

There are many things to keep in mind when pruning, including canopy ratios and pruning angles. For a detailed explanation of pruning techniques and warnings, call the Wildcat District Extension office at (620) 724-8233 or email me at jr637@ksu.edu.

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