

Pruning for Life
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Recently I was witness to a crime so horrendous I could not believe my own eyes. No, the police were not involved and I was not subpoenaed to testify. The perpetrator probably did not even realize what had been done. This fellow pruned a tree on his boulevard. This in itself was not a big deal, but when I saw what he had pruned it became one. He had pruned a Honey-locust. This particular tree is borderline hardy in our area. The hardiness coupled with the trees high level of susceptibility to many wood rotting fungi makes this attempted murder and only time will tell if the charge should be murder one. Trees take a long time to reach maturity therefore they also take a long time to die after major stress.

In the urban environment trees suffer many stresses. Drought conditions are almost always present even during times of high rainfall. Salt accumulations from de-icing operations can cause additional problems to tree health. Throw on top of these some cement and maybe construction injury or mower blight and you have a recipe for tree death. Then what do we do? We improperly prune the tree adding even more stress. This increases disease and insect susceptibility. Proper pruning is not only making the right cuts; it includes cutting at the right time.

This particular Honey-locust would have preferred to be pruned during the dead of winter. January or February when the air is cold and fungal spores and insects are nowhere to be found is the best time for pruning some other trees too. Elm and oak should be pruned during the winter. Prune these no later than the end of March. You can wait until March to prune ash and birch. Prune apple trees, mountain-ash, hackberry, and linden during early April. Maples, boxelder, black walnut, and weeping willow can be pruned in May and June.

Making proper cuts reduces wound size which speeds up the healing process. Cut large branches using a three step process. Undercut the branch half way through the branch about six inches from the trunk, overcut the remainder of the branch, and then cut the stub off just outside of the branch bark collar. The branch bark collar is the raised area you will see next to the trunk where the branch attaches. Never cut flush with the trunk as this will never heal. Smaller branches can be cut outside of the collar in one cut. Smaller cuts heal much faster than large wounds. Chainsaws are not a pruning tool, if a chainsaw is needed the cuts are too big. Always cut to a bud or a main branch or trunk. Topping is not an acceptable pruning technique.

Remember safety rules in the pruning world. Stay on the ground; never climb a ladder to get higher in the tree. Use a pole pruner or hire an ISA certified arborist to prune larger trees. When in doubt get professional help. In the least give me a call for advice on proper pruning or to get recommendation of some certified arborists.

More information on horticultural topics can be found by visiting us online 24 hours a day on the Pennington County web site, www.co.pennington.sd.us/extension/extsvc.html which is updated often, or by calling me at 605-394-2188 or e-mail to ricky.abrahamson@sdstate.edu.