

**INSIDE GRUNDY COUNTY**  
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**February 9, 2011**

**Now is a Good Time to Prune Your Trees**

If the cold weather has kept you cooped up and you are developing a severe case of cabin fever, then it might be time to put your warm clothes on and head outdoors to prune your shade trees. You might ask yourself, “Why would I want to do that now?”

First of all, February through March is generally regarded as the best time to prune most deciduous trees. Oak trees are the one exception; the best time for them is December through February. The absence of foliage makes it easy to view the general structure of the tree which makes it easier to select and remove appropriate branches. Also, the walling off or compartmentalization of wounds occurs most rapidly just prior to onset of growth in the spring. Once these areas are walled off, the rest of the plant is protected from decay causing pathogens and rot. During this time period, trees do not have to cope with opportunistic insects and disease causing pathogens. Be aware that large amounts of sap can flow from pruning cuts on maple, birch and elm when pruned in late winter. This loss of sap does not harm the trees and will eventually slow and stop.

The next logical question might be: “Why prune?” If you are unsure of the benefits of pruning consider these reasons: safety, health and appearance. Safety pruning may be necessary when a tree or shrub has been planted in the wrong place. This means the tree or shrub interferes with the line of sight of an automobile driver, bicycle rider or pedestrian thus requiring removal of branches causing the problem. Eliminating branches that grow into utility lines and removing dead or structurally unsound branches from the trees is another way pruning improves the safety of a tree. If large sections of a tree must be removed for safety reasons, then the best choice might be to remove it from the landscape.

The health of the tree is another good reason to prune. This might involve removing crowded, rubbing or crossing branches to decrease the chance the tree will ‘wound’ itself. Removing diseased or insect ridden branches can also help maintain good tree health. Developing a strong framework through careful pruning contributes to the health of the tree. Trees that are neglected at an early age frequently have structural problems later in their life.

The third reason for pruning involves a fair amount of subjectivity. Here pruning is done for the sake of appearance. Some landscapes need plants to be molded into formal or rigid shapes. Other landscapes require a plant’s natural tendencies to be accentuated and not modified. Trees and shrubs pruned to take advantage of their natural growth habit usually require less maintenance than those that are carefully sculpted.

Hopefully this information will help encourage you to check your trees to determine if they would benefit from pruning. For more specific information on pruning, contact the Grundy office of ISU Extension at 319-824-6979 and ask for publication *SUL 5 Pruning Trees: Shade, Flowering, and Conifer*.