



Pruning Trees in Winter

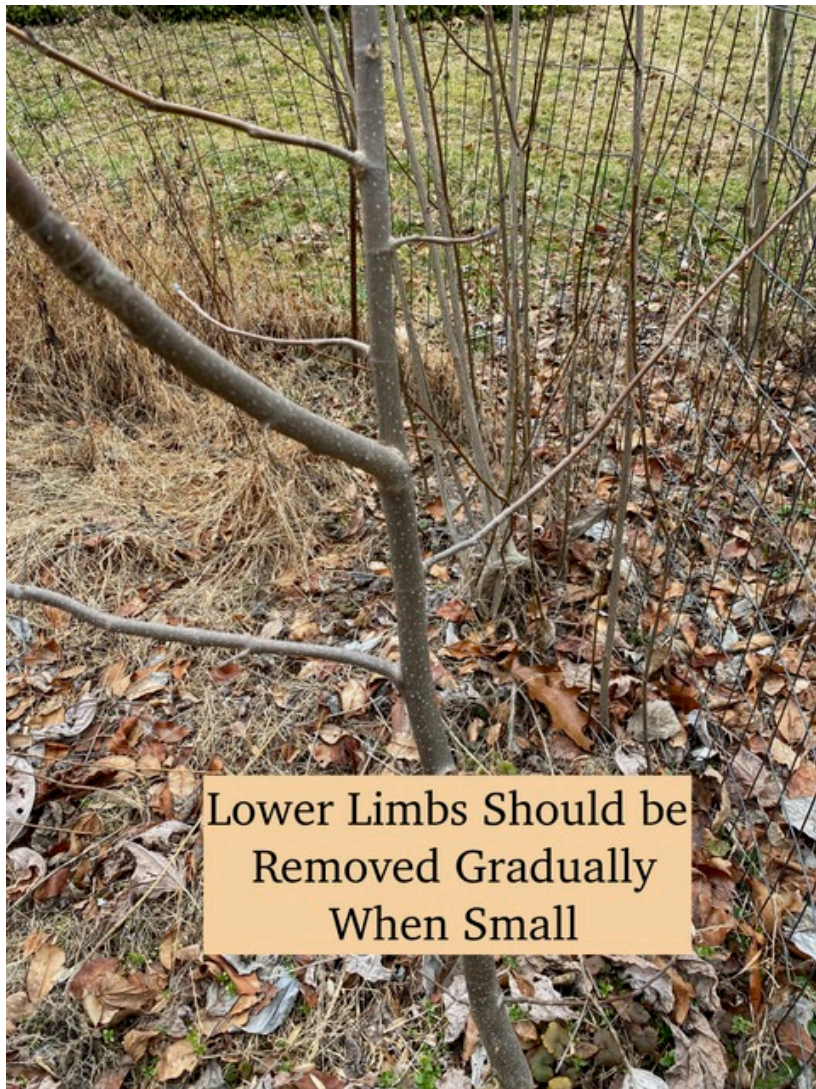
by Kathy T.

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Late February to early March is the best time for pruning many landscape trees. Why is winter such a good season to prune?

- Without leaves, it is easier to see the shape of the tree and anything that is out of proportion or structurally unsound.
- Your pruning cuts on dormant trees will not stimulate new growth, producing less overall stress on the tree.
- In winter, many disease organisms and pests are also dormant, so less likely to invade the pruning cut and weaken the tree. For example, oaks and elms should only be pruned in winter to avoid oak wilt and Dutch elm disease.

Not all trees and shrubs should be pruned in winter. Spring flowering trees are usually pruned right after bloom. Trees like maple, birch, and beech may bleed sap from wounds if pruned now, but the sap loss doesn't hurt the tree.



Lower Limbs Should be
Removed Gradually
When Small

Nevertheless, if you are concerned, they can be pruned in late spring after the sap stops running. Dead branches can be removed at any time. Although fruit trees are pruned during this time period, they need more specific pruning to enhance production.

Nevertheless, walk around your yard, and inspect your trees. What should you look for?

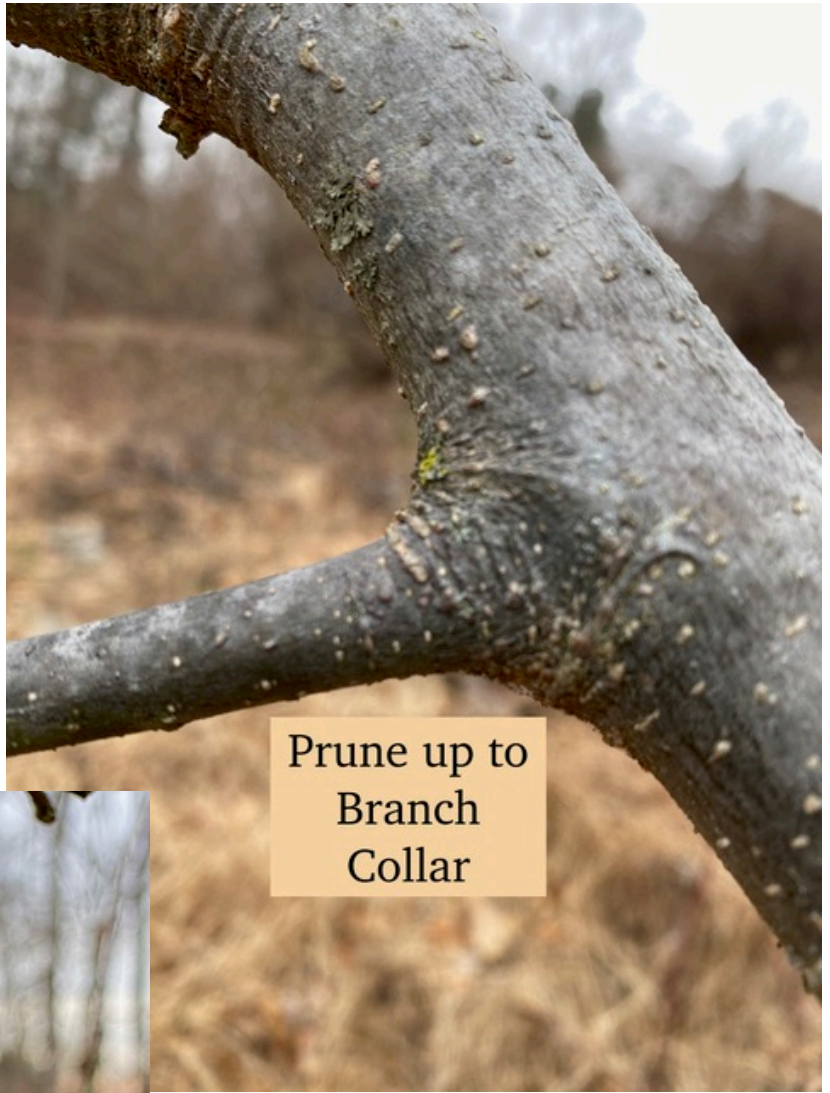
Start with structural problems:

Remove lower branches on any young trees that you plan to walk or mow under, (or in case of NJ, perhaps branches within the deer browse zone.) Even as the tree itself grows, these branches will remain the same distance from the ground. Start taking off the low ones gradually, over the course of several winters, until the ground clearance is at the desired height.





Cutting branches while the tree is young stresses the tree less than sawing off big branches later. Prune the branches off right above the branch collar, the place where the branch thickens to meet the trunk. The collar contains hormones that will enable the scar to heal quickly.



Prune up to
 Branch
 Collar



Prune Broken
 Branches
 Back to
 Viable Bud
 so You Don't
 Leave a Stub

Remove broken, diseased, or dangling branches. These can be pruned back to the branch collar near the trunk or cut back 1/8"-1/4" above a viable bud that points in the direction a new branch should grow. If the branch is diseased, cut it back to healthy wood, and disinfect your pruners with isopropyl alcohol or a 10% bleach/water solution after each cut.

Remove any undesirable suckers at or below ground level. Continue cutting them out as soon as they emerge.



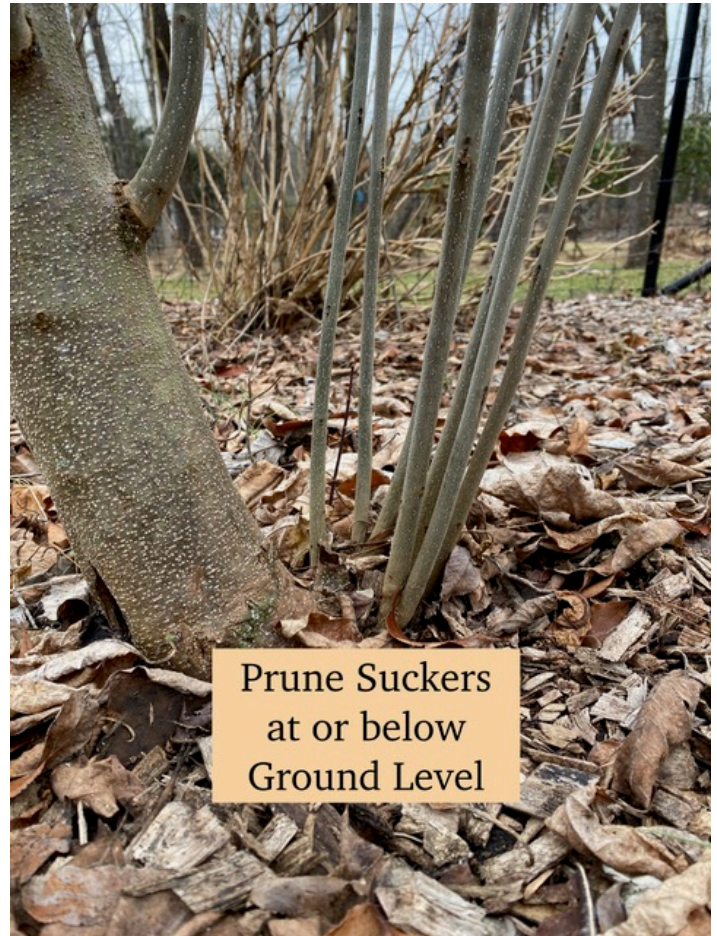


Check for crossed branches. Two branches rubbing against each other will damage the bark on each and open the tree to pathogens. One branch should be pruned away.

Check for tight (under 45 degrees) "V" crotches and co-dominant leaders. As the branches get larger and grow closer together, the pressure on each is likely to cause one to break. Keep the strongest branch and cut the other out.



Crossing Branches
 May Cause Damage to Bark



Prune Suckers
 at or below
 Ground Level

Remove any dead branches.

If you can easily access the problem areas in your trees, make sure your pruning tools are sharp to avoid tearing the bark. If the branches are over your head, or you have questions about specific trees, you may decide to call a professional. Rutgers Agricultural Cooperative Extension Service offers guidance on [hiring a tree care professional](#).

Rutgers Extension in Ocean County has targeted information on [pruning specific trees and shrubs](#).

The University of Delaware has a fact sheet with specific information on [pruning tools and the "3 cut method"](#) for pruning large limbs.

Penn State has more about [winter pruning](#).

