

# Going Out on a Limb: Fall Pruning

Autumn rains and winds can be tough on a tree- have you checked how yours are holding up to the weather? In most cases nowadays it's not enough to just let your yard trees "grow naturally." Trees growing up in a robust forest are self-regulated by competition and a denser overstory. Backyard trees, however, get so much light that they can grow far too many branches at once, leading to weak limbs. Trees that have not been properly trimmed and pruned can snap under the pressure and can be a danger to your home. Now is a great time to think about what work needs to be done on your trees before the snowy holidays. Proper and well-timed pruning has many benefits for keeping trees strong and healthy.

While it is a good way to improve the looks of your trees, the ultimate goal of proper pruning should be to maintain vigorous growth throughout the life of the tree. For younger trees, this means removing the weaker limbs so that the strongest limbs can thrive. Not only is it easier to prune young trees, but it is also best for the tree to start early so you can have a greater influence to make sure it grows up nice and strong. For older trees, however, this means removing old and dead limbs so that the newer growth can be stronger. An added benefit of pruning older trees is they will also be less susceptible to pests and diseases. For fruit trees of any age, proper pruning can also mean the tree is able to produce larger fruit and the limbs are strong enough to support the added weight.

Timing is important when it comes to pruning. The growing season, from late spring through summer, is the worst time for pruning. Choosing to trim your trees

during this time can lead to a whole host of issues such as bark damage, smaller fruits, stump sprouting, weakened trees, and bacterial or fungal infections. One such fungal disease that is of concern in this region is Oak Wilt. Since Oak Wilt is more easily transmitted during the growing season, it is strongly recommended that you do not trim or prune oaks during the warmer months, typically April through September.

Fall and winter, on the other hand, are perfect for pruning because the trees are dormant. Basically, what this means is that the tree's energy is being stored in sap in the roots in the winter rather than being



Proper dormant-season pruning is highly beneficial for the health and aesthetics of your

used to grow new wood like in the spring. That's why fall is the most popular time to tap trees for maple syrup- the tree is actively pulling all that sweet stuff right down to its roots. Pruning during this time means less damage and stress to a tree compared with cutting actively growing wood.

How you prune a tree can be just as important as when you prune a tree. First, follow the branches from the top down, to see where the branches connect and get a better view of your tree. The best branches



to keep are those growing at 60-degree angles, which would be "10 and 2" when facing the tree. You will want to trim any old or dead wood from these limbs to keep them healthy. Branches that are at a very broad or narrow angle, or those that are obviously rotting, can be removed. Larger branches should be cut flush to the tree, while smaller branches should be cut behind a bud at your desired length. It can be hard to tell when you have pruned too much, but a good guideline is to never remove more than ¼ of the crown.

Proper pruning is essential for the long-term health of your trees but can be dangerous to work alone on older trees or those with weak limbs. It is highly recommended to get these jobs done with the help of a certified arborist. The Barry Conservation District can provide referrals to arborists to help with your pruning needs. If you are having trouble with your trees, call District Forester Ben Savoie at 269-908-4134, or send an email to [ben.savoie@macd.org](mailto:ben.savoie@macd.org) for technical assistance at no cost to you.

## CURRENT OPEN REFERRALS

If you are interested in any of this work please call Ben Savoie at (269) 908-4139. Ben will make sure that the landowner is aware of your interest and provide your contact information.

**08-19-01:** Oak forest dotted with some swamp on either side, and some wet spots. Was harvested 10 years ago, and landowner interested in getting forest management plan and doing future timber harvests. Landowner plans on living on property in next few years. 30 acres forested. Baltimore Twp, Barry County.

This month by the numbers:

8 Site visits - 346 acres  
4 acres QFP verified— 246 acres  
5 Referrals