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Don't fall victim to fall tree pruning

This time of year, there is one question that I get asked a lot: is now a good time to prune my trees? In most instances, the answer is no. The best time to prune your trees is going to be late winter to early spring. Think February or March.

Why not prune your trees in the fall? This has to do with tree physiology. Trees store resources in their roots and move these resources up to their shoots when they are growing. In the fall, trees are starting to go dormant and moving resources down to their roots. If we prune in the fall, we disrupt this cycle. The tree may start to move resources towards the pruning cuts to try and compensate for the lost branches. This new growth may not have time to harden off before the winter, making the tree more susceptible to winter damage. It also uses up valuable resources the tree needs to get through the winter.

Ideally you prune your trees in late winter. This again has to do with tree physiology. When you prune a tree, it creates an open wound. When we get an open wound, we keep it clean and our bodies know to regrow the skin in that spot, slowly closing the wound. Unlike us however, trees do not heal but seal. They will form a callous tissue that slowly starts to cover the wound and reduce the risk of infection. While they can seal wounds in the dormant season, they recover from wounds faster in the growing season. By pruning right before the tree enters its growing season, we limit the amount of time the tree has an open, exposed wound.

Lastly, we generally stay away from summer pruning, as summer can be a challenging time for trees. Hot weather and droughts can stress trees and shrubs. If we prune while plants are already stressed, it may worsen their condition.

While it is clear that late winter or early spring is the best time to prune your trees, there are a few caveats. Dead or diseased branches can be removed any time of year. Not only are these branches a hazard to building and people, but a proper and controlled pruning cut will do less damage than a rough wound left behind from a branch snapping in the wind. Additionally, you should always remove branches with a heavy disease or insect infestation to prevent the issue from spreading to the rest of the tree.

Another caveat comes for flowering trees. Some flowering trees set their buds on older growth in late summer or fall. Others set their buds on new growth each spring. For flowering trees, it is important to know when they will produce buds, so that you can time your pruning around it and not cut off all your flower buds.

As a rule of thumb, prune your trees in late winter or early spring. If you have a flowering tree, it will be worthwhile to learn more about that tree's flowering cycle so you can prune at the proper time. There are a few other tree species that require different pruning times, so if you have questions on when and how to prune your trees, feel free to reach out for more guidance.