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### **It's Time to Prune Your Trees**

As spring gets closer, one of the most pressing things on our outdoor to do list is tree pruning. Late winter and early spring are the best time to prune for a flush of spring growth while causing the least amount of damage to your trees.

Tree pruning can feel intimidating, but by understanding your motives and goals for pruning, it can be an easy and quick task. The biggest goal is to create a safe, strong tree. Most trees should have a strong central leader with large branches coming off 45-to-60-degree angle. This limits the odds of branches snapping or the tree falling. The early years are the most essential for pruning, as it is difficult to impossible to change the structure of a large tree.

The other reason to prune, is thin out the canopy. Dense branches can prevent light from reaching interior leaves, and you may see increased branch die back. A thick canopy also means that wind cannot flow through the tree. Instead, wind pushes against the tree, which can cause damage and broken branches. Additionally, increased airflow in a canopy helps prevent disease by reducing moisture on the leaves.

To start the pruning process, start by targeting the three D's: dead, damage, and disease. Branches that are dead, or are damaged beyond recovery should be removed. If you see any signs of disease on the branches, like discoloration or irregular growths in the branch, you will likely want to remove those as well.

After that, you will want to target other problem areas. One problem is weak branches that come off the trunk at a narrow angle. Another is branches that overlap and rub against each other. These branches can hit against each other in the wind and cause damage.

There are a few things to keep in mind while pruning. Although you have a lot to accomplish while pruning, try to limit the number of cuts you make, and selectively take branches that will get you closer to your ideal tree form – which is likely a central leader form. Make sure you take branches from all sides of the tree so that you maintain an even weight distribution. In general, you do not want to remove more than 25% to 30% of your tree's branches at once or you risk damaging your tree. Dead branches that you remove do not count towards this.

Lastly, if you have fruit trees, there are a few more things to keep in mind. When pruning fruit trees, your apples and pears do need a central leader form, stone fruits like peaches or plums will do best with an open vase shape. As you prune to the proper shape for your type of fruit tree, look for flower buds. These buds are where fruits will form. If you make cuts that remove all your flower buds, you will not get any fruit. If you leave all the branches, fruit can weigh down tree and cause significant damage.

Learning to prune trees can be a very visual process. If you are new to pruning, you can find videos and resources available online at [kansashealthyyards.org](https://kansashealthyyards.org), or check out the recording of our Garden Hour Webinar from March 2021 on tree pruning on K-State Research and Extension's YouTube Channel. Lastly, do not forget to reach out to your local extension office for more assistance!