

## Archive for September, 2008

### Removing A Live Tree From The Homesite

Friday, September 5th, 2008

One of the most difficult decisions a home owner faces is whether or not to remove a beloved tree, which is neither dead nor dying. It is especially difficult whenever the tree is causing problems because it has outgrown the space where it was planted. The situation can be doubly trying if the tree was planted by a child, or grandchild, as part of a past school event such as an Arbor Day celebration. The emotional attachment never leaves them, or you, as you watch “their” tree grow and develop through the years. The thought of removing it before it dies, or is even stressed, is almost incomprehensible to most people. Most people know that trees around the home site provide many benefits that people enjoy: landscape beauty, food and homes for wildlife, protection from weather extremes, erosion control, etc. The **right tree in the right place** is an asset to the home owner that increases as the years progress.

However, a tree in the wrong place, even if it’s the “right” species, can become a liability, if something isn’t done to address the situation. For example, a red oak (good species) planted too close to the house (wrong place) won’t be too much of a problem while it’s young. However, after about 8-10 years, that hardy and tough little oak will grow into a rambunctious teenager who loves to slap its branches into the bedroom window; maybe even breaking one now and then. That “lovely” little silver maple (wrong species) you and your daughter planted, suddenly ( seems like overnight) becomes the tall brute of a tree that sends limbs and branches down on your roof when the ice storms come calling. The Siberian elm (again, the wrong species) that grew fast because you “needed some quick shade” now (after 20 years of growth) becomes the ogre that casts dead limbs and branches into the path of your power mower to bedevil you and mess up your lawn.

There are many other examples of tree problems which are a direct result of planting in the wrong place, poor species selection, poor pruning techniques, mower and weed whip damage, or any number of other things that cause trees to become liabilities instead of assets.

In spite of the problems, and consternation, caused by trees in the wrong place, most home owners are still reluctant to remove an old friend who isn’t dead or dying. Instead they look for alternatives to eliminate the “problem” without removing the tree. Unfortunately, there are few good options available to do this without harming the tree. Any drastic action taken can only kill the tree slowly over time, and will only be a temporary solution to the problem (it will return quickly and probably worsen) caused by the tree being out of place. What **can** be done?

### The Kindest Cut

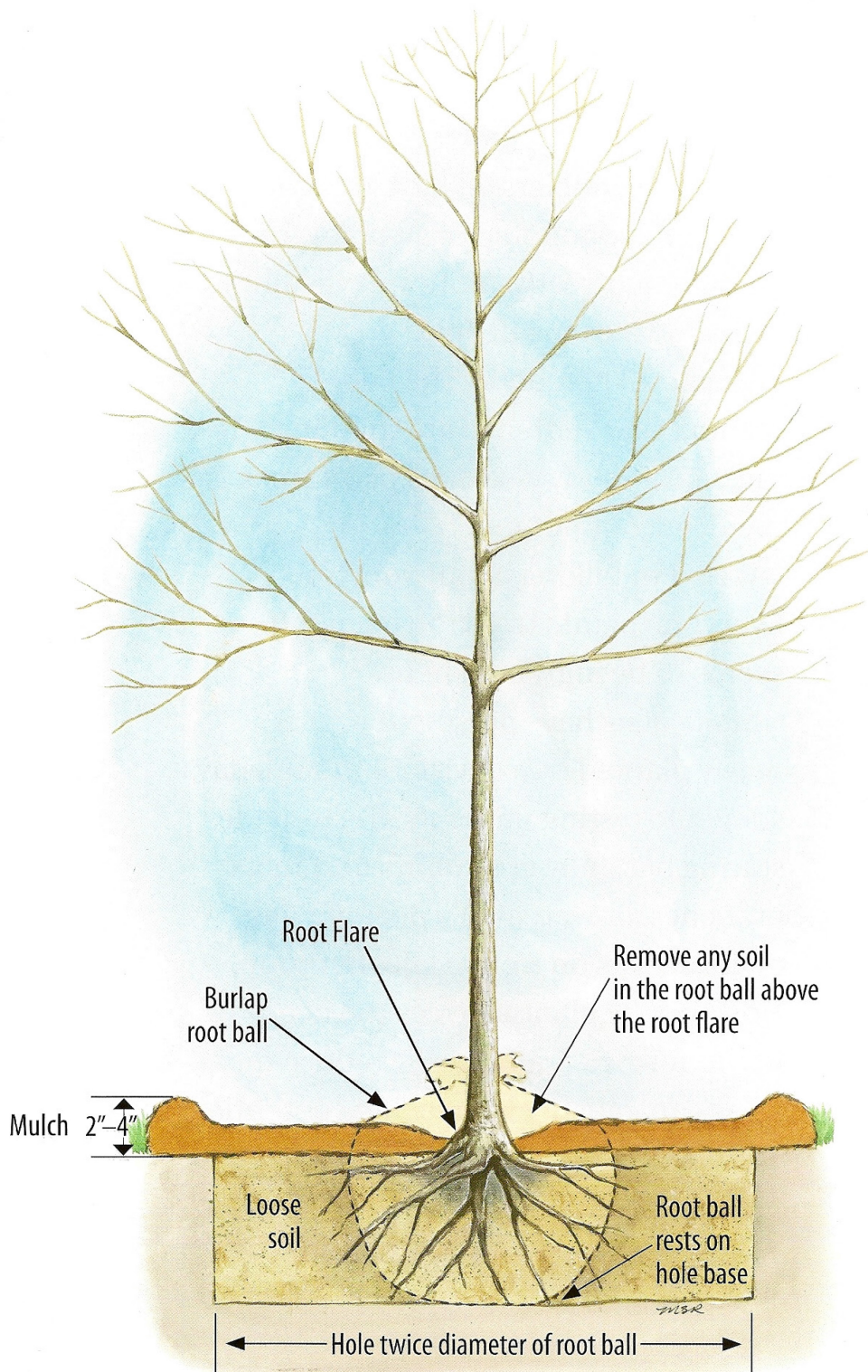
The solution to a problem caused by a tree in the wrong place (too tall, too wide-spreading, branches shedding, etc.) is really very simple: **remove the tree completely, and replant with the right tree in the right place!** This action will avert future problems that might occur due to the trees presence in the landscape around your home. Don’t make the mistake of having a tree “topped” or cut back to make it smaller. Genetics and environment determine how tall a tree will get. Topped trees can regain their original height in as little as two years, and the resulting fast growing shoots are extremely weak and loosely attached, which makes them even more susceptible to breakage and storm damage. For more information about the damage done by tree topping, please click on the “**Tree Topping Link**” on the main MCFC web page.

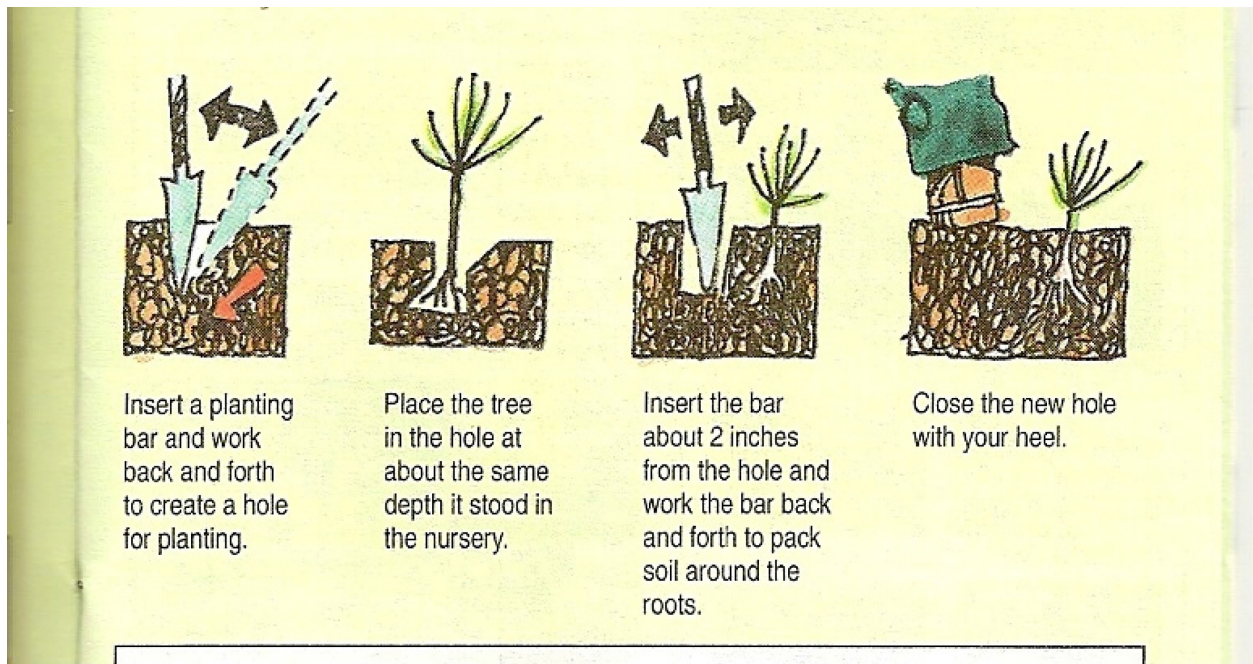
Even though the solution is simple, the decision to remove a live tree causing problems, can be difficult, at best, and heart rendering at worst. However, sometimes the kindest cut of all is the one made at the base of the trunk.

### **Planting Technique**

Saturday, September 13th, 2008

Proper technique is the major factor in assuring that a newly planted tree has the opportunity to take advantage of the available moisture and nutrients and get off to a good start. Following are two illustrations of proper planting technique for both seedlings and larger trees.





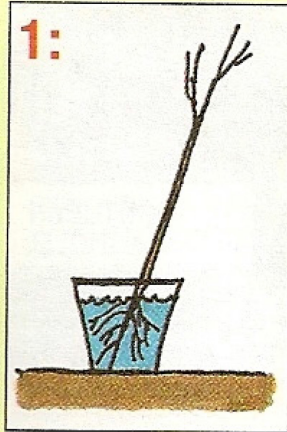
Proper Seedling Planting Technique (From: National Arbor Day Foundation)

Only want to plant one bareroot seedling or larger tree? Here's some help with that:

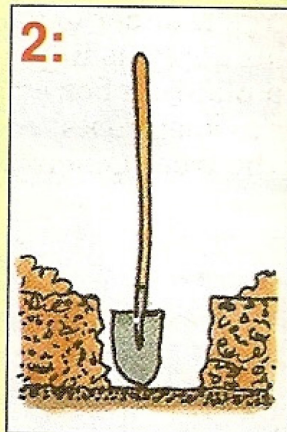


## Planting Bare-Root Trees

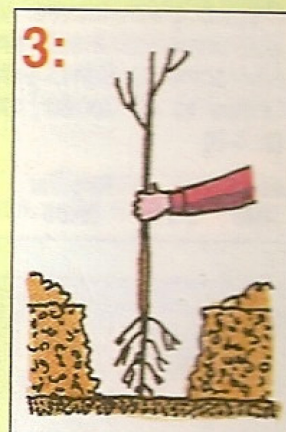
It is best to plant bare-root trees immediately, in order to keep the fragile roots from drying out. If you can't plant because of weather or soil conditions, store the trees in a cool place and keep the roots moist.



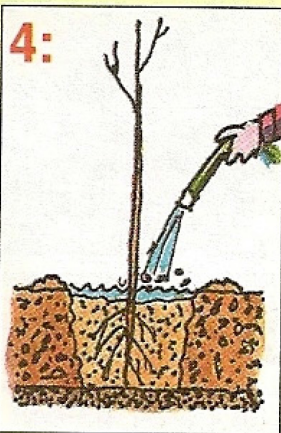
1: Unpack tree and soak in water 3 to 6 hours. Do not plant with packing material attached to roots and do not allow roots to dry out.



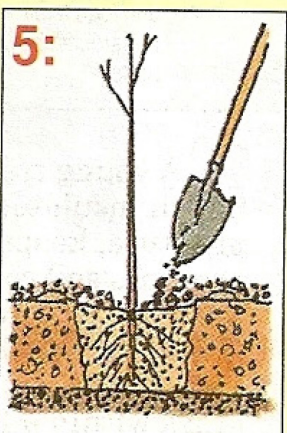
2: Dig a hole, wider than seems necessary, so the roots can spread without crowding. Remove any grass within a 3-foot circular area. To aid root growth, turn soil in an area up to 3 feet in diameter.



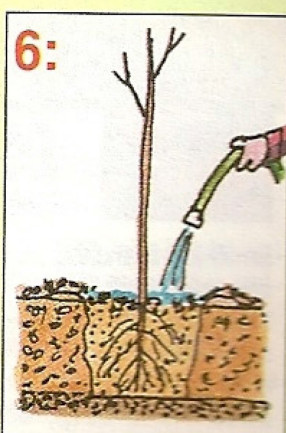
3: Plant the tree at the same depth it stood in the nursery, without crowding the roots. Partially fill the hole, firming the soil around the lower roots. Do not add soil amendments, such as peat or bark.



4: Shovel in the remaining soil. It should be firmly but not tightly packed. Construct a water-holding basin around the tree. Give the tree plenty of water.



5: After the water has soaked in, place a 2-inch deep protective mulch in an area 3 feet in diameter around the base of the tree (but not touching the trunk.)



6: During dry weather, generously water the tree every week or 10 days during the first year. Water slowly at the dripline.

## **Manage What You Have First**

Sunday, September 21st, 2008

I've talked a lot about planting trees, so far, and it's usually a good thing; for both homeowners and communities. In fact, I've found it is much easier to get a person to plant a tree (or trees) than it is to convince them that trees will need management along the way, if they are to provide the optimum benefits that we seek from them. Harder still, has been trying to convince folks that they can get the most "bang for their buck or time" by taking care of what trees are already out there; whether they were established by Mother Nature (natural regeneration) or were planted by someone who couldn't make it back to do aftercare.

Taking care of what we already have growing is not a glamorous part of forestry, but is probably the most productive, be it out in the woods, or out on the town. Photos of kids planting trees makes for better news copy than photos of work crews watering street trees, replacing mulch, pruning, etc. When I was a young forester (in about 1962), just starting to work with private landowners, I was sent to inspect a proposed Soil Bank project that was to be done by a lawyer who had bought an old farm and was going to "improve" it by planting 30,000 walnut seedlings in a 30 acre field populated with fescue grass. I knew that this was too many walnut seedlings to plant per acre, but the program parameters called for 1,000 seedlings per acre.

When I looked at the proposed planting, I also looked at the rest of the old thrown-out farm, and was astounded to discover thousands of naturally-established walnut trees ranging in size from seedling to saplings to even small poles and a few large trees. The potential for immediate improvement was great, and I tried my best to encourage the lawyer to put his efforts into the existing stands, but to no avail. He insisted on going ahead with the planting. I did everything I could to disqualify his proposal, but had little success; the site qualified as being OK for walnut, he had his seedlings ordered, tree planting machine reserved, crew lined up, etc. All the Soil Bank requirements were in place, so I had to approve the project. After he finished, I inspected the job, and they had done an excellent job of planting. I still encouraged him to manage what he had out there and he said he would (eventually) but really needed to make sure this planting "worked." I later found out he needed the government payment to pay off a mortgage payment on the property.

About 15 years later, I ran across this lawyer at a Walnut Council field tour, and he made a point of telling me that I was right, and he should have managed the walnuts already out there. The planting had failed because there was very little follow-up on weed or fescue control or anything else. The Soil Bank Program didn't have a very long time period for maintaining a tree planting, and no re-inspection requirements after the first year or two. He said he had started managing the existing regeneration within the past 5 years, and could see that I was right. He lamented losing ten years of accelerated growth, and apologized for not listening to me. His pursuit of a government payment got in the way of making a proper long term management decision that would have paid off much better than a failed plantation.

What does this story have to do with urban tree care? I believe it can be used as an analogy to things we see happening in urban and suburban settings throughout the state. How often do we see trees left unpruned because it's easy to put off, with a promise to "get to it later?" Or, how about the homeowners association that wants to clear out all that "brush" (natural regeneration) in the common part of the subdivision so they can plant some really nice trees to make it look more "natural?" The same thing may be true of the individual homeowner who sees some funny looking leaf on a woody plant right in the middle of a place where they want to establish their favorite redbud tree. So, he/she pulls out the naturally-occurring redbud seedling and replaces it with a potted redbud seedling (seed source unknown) from the local parking lot lawn & garden center, then has a heckuva time nurturing it through the first year — just to get it to live.

There are probably many more examples out there concerning the value of managing what you already have growing; many of which are probably better than those I've mentioned. Being aware of the opportunities to manage existing vegetation, and following through with required treatments, can lead to a homesite that is comfortable and appealing, an urban forest that exemplifies community pride and appeal, or even a rural forest that is as productive as it can be for recreation, watershed protection, wood production, and wildlife habitat enhancement.

Good stewardship of any asset requires that you first take care of the basis handed you before trying to add to those assets. Trees are no exception.

### **Pruning Young Trees (Part 1)**

Sunday, September 28th, 2008

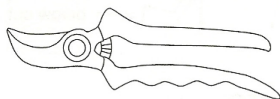
How you prune a young tree during its first 10 years will affect the shape, strength, and life span. Proper pruning will save you money and give you safer, healthier, more beautiful, and easier-to-maintain trees. Proper pruning (some folks call it natural pruning because it maintains the natural form of the tree as it grows) should begin early in a tree's life, but usually not before age three. A new transplant needs its foliage to produce new growth while it is becoming established.

There are several keys to proper pruning of young trees:

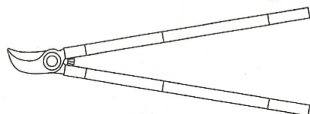
1. Use the proper tools and keep them sharp. Do not use chain saws.
2. Prune at the proper time of year. Winter is best, spring is the worst time, and summer is OK if only light pruning is done (not too much foliage removed at one time).
3. Remove whole limbs or branches rather than just cutting them off to shorten their length.
4. Use a three cut method to remove a limb or branch greater than one inch in diameter.
5. Save branch collars.
- 6 Don't overprune.
7. Prune with an eye to the future.

I realize these bullets cry out for more detailed explanations, and I will provide more details over the next several blog entries as I expand on each item separately. To get started, please refer to the illustration below that shows pruning tools, and a monthly chart for best pruning times:

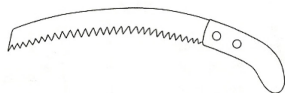
## Use the Correct Tools



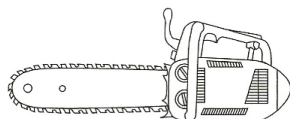
Hand pruners are useful for small branches, up to about 1/2-inch diameter. Use loppers or a saw for larger branches, or for species with hardwood.



Long-handled loppers may be used to remove larger diameter branches, but precise cuts are more difficult to make.



Curved blade pruning saws cut on the pull stroke. Newer blade designs are able to cut large and small diameter branches quickly and cleanly. Pruning saws are available with fixed or folding blades, or mounted on a pole. Larger pruning saws are sometimes used by professionals.



Chainsaws are not recommended for general pruning except by professionals as a time saver. (Consider hiring an arborist for large or potentially dangerous work.)

## Timing is Important

	J	F	M	A	M	J	J	A	S	O	N	D
Best Time	●	●										●
Worst Time				●	●							
Light Pruning	●	●	●			●	●	●	●	●	●	●

To minimize damage and synchronize with the natural growth cycle, prune in winter (January, February). Avoid heavy pruning as leaves are expanding in early spring (April, May) when tree energy reserves are low. Timing for light pruning is less critical. For maximum display of spring flowering species, prune after bloom (June or later). Prune dead limbs and branches at any time.