

Archive for December, 2009

The Dormant Season – Part 2

Saturday, December 5th, 2009

Winter poses several threats to the health of trees. Obvious dangers such as ice storms, sub-zero temperatures, wind damage, etc. are all part of the natural scene that trees will encounter while they are in the resting period. Most native trees are conditioned to whatever Mother Nature decides to throw at them, and usually survive pretty well, unless they are in decline already or have been unusually stressed during the past growing season. Of course, a serious ice storm can damage even healthy specimens, but the damage is normally less severe and they recover in much better condition than unhealthy and/or non-native species. Non-native species, in particular, are much more subject to damage by the vagaries of midwest winter weather, no matter what their health condition may be.

Sometimes the less obvious dangers during the dormant season may be the ones that do damage to trees; and which the average tree care giver is not aware of:

1. Burning leaves in great bonfires under the branches of dormant trees can generate enough heat to scorch the lower branches of even large specimens. This can result in the death of tissues that later open up as avenues for pathogens to invade the tree; and usually kills the limbs and branches affected.
2. Pouring hot water on a tree's limbs that are covered with ice (to melt the ice) can be as devastating as the weight of the ice itself. If a storm has occurred, and a limb is not broken by the time the storm is over, it's probably not going to break, unless follow-up winds become so strong that massive breaks will become common. If you can't remove ice from a limb by *gently* shaking or brushing with your hand, leave it alone and plan to fix whatever breakage may occur (after the storm is over, and the ice melts).
3. Protect a young tree from sunscald. Yes, even in the winter, the bright and intense beams of the sun can "scald" the bark on the south- and west-facing sides of young trees. This causes wounds that later (once the growing season begins) produce patches of dead material that, in some severe cases, may be widespread enough to girdle the stem; thus, killing the tree. If your tree is a species susceptible to sunscald, try to shade the south and west sides of the lower stem for a few years; until the tree produces tougher bark in the exposed areas. Advice on how to best shade the stem of your particular species is available at most garden centers or nurseries that have certified gardeners and/or nurserymen on staff.
4. Don't bang around on a dormant tree just because you think you can't hurt it while it is not growing. Tissues, including the tough-looking bark, can be damaged any time of the year, and winter is no exception. Don't let the kids drive their battery-driven toys into the tree; particularly the larger ones that they sit in. It could hurt them, and will probably hurt the tree. Avoid using the tree as a backstop for thrown objects, or other projectiles. A tree is subject to enough danger during its lifetime. Don't be another one.

EXPERTS AGREE

DON'T

TOP YOUR

TREE

Planting The Live Christmas Tree

Saturday, December 12th, 2009

Every once in a while, a homeowner may get the idea to have a “live” Christmas tree; as opposed to a fresh cut tree; which is no longer alive since it has been severed from the root system. The live tree can be enjoyed as the indoor yule tree to be decorated and danced around in celebration of the season. Then, since it comes in a pot, with a root system (that is kept moist – by the way), it can be outplanted after Christmas to become a permanent part of the home’s landscape. Sounds like a neat thing to do, right?

Not so fast, says the old forester; who wonders just how much thought has gone into the idea. I doubt that much planning has gone into the decision to try a live tree, as outlined above. So, here are some considerations that you should take into account if you want to do this:

1. Is the species suitable for your area? Many species used for Christmas trees are not suited to Missouri’s growing conditions, and won’t survive. Others, such as Scot’s pine, may do OK in our climate, but they do not perform well in a landscape situation, and are not recommended for such use in Missouri.

2. Do you have a good space for the tree? Remember, the rules of Right Tree, Right Place still apply. If you let the kids plant the live tree anywhere they want, you could come to regret it in just a few years; leading to a possible heart-rendering removal of the beloved reminder of a warm Christmas past.

3. Can you keep the tree viable and safe until it can be planted outside? One can’t just take the tree outside, in the dead of winter and plant it, unless there has been an unusual warm spell around the holidays. If the ground is still frozen, you’ll have to wait until a deep thaw has occurred, along with some drying out, before the soil will be suitable for planting. You will need some place to keep the potted specimen safe and unfrozen itself until suitable planting conditions arrive (usually in late February or early March — maybe).

4. The tree will have to be watered occasionally, but not too much. Who will be assigned to do this chore? A live Christmas tree can be an asset to your landscape, if it is selected carefully, and planned into the overall design of your homeplace. Who knows, you may be able to put a good species in a good spot where it can serve as an annual yuletide outdoor display; with lights, decorations, etc. If so, good show!

Merry Christmas to all!

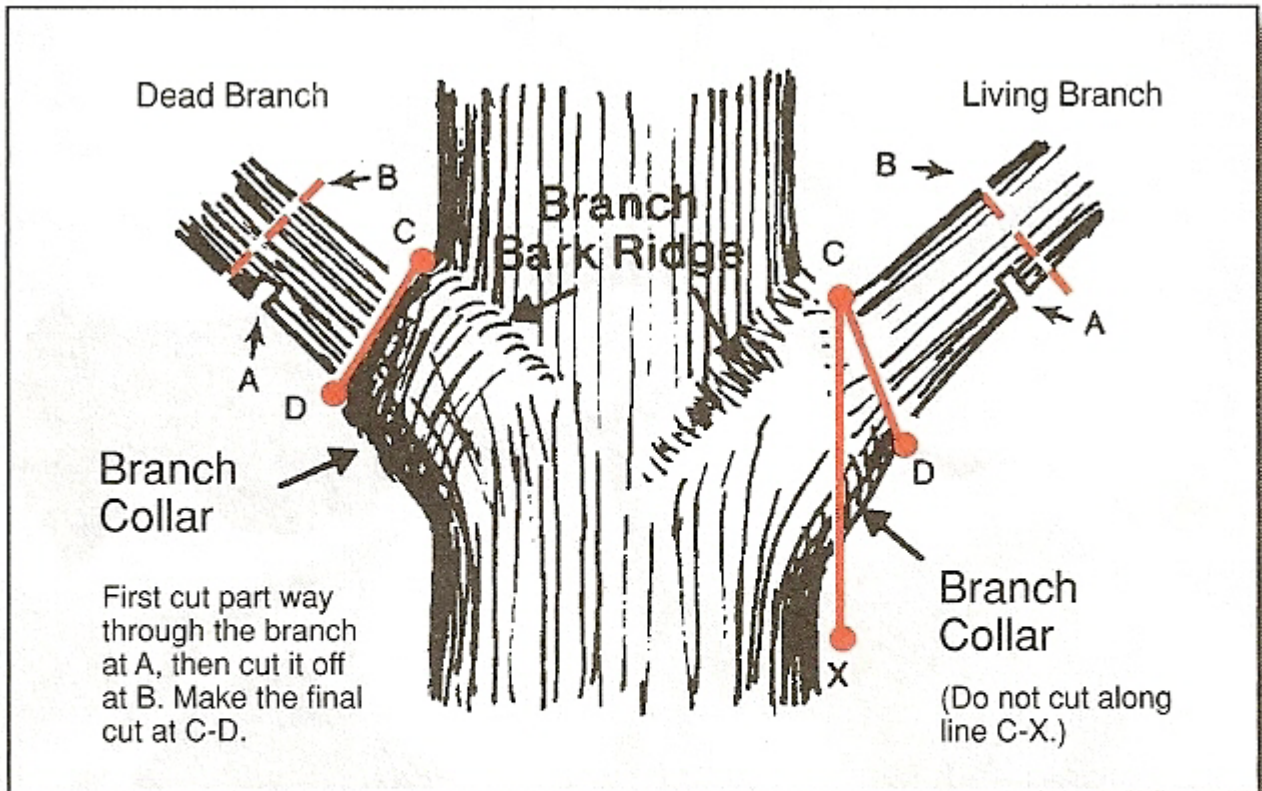
Winter Pruning

Saturday, December 26th, 2009

In general, I recommend that most winter pruning be done later in the season; usually from mid-February on. However, pruning can be done at almost anytime of the year, if the work is done correctly. The dead of winter can be a good time to inspect your deciduous trees and prune as needed; especially if you have some problem limbs or branches. You can more easily see what needs to be done, since there is no foliage present to block your view into the crown area. Cleanup is also easier since there are no leaves to deal with.

Crossing limbs that rub, unwanted sprouts, tight limb junctions or crowded limb spacing, and overall structure are more easily spotted during dormancy, and are usually more accessible for making proper cuts. Dead limbs may be a little more difficult to spot, but they should definitely be removed ASAP, and winter is a good time to do that.

If you cannot do the work yourself, winter is a good time to contact a certified arborist to do the job. Companies are usually less busy this time of year, or you can more easily get on their schedule for a suitable time later. If you do decide to do a little winter pruning, pictured below is an illustration from the National Arbor Day Foundation depicting the proper way to remove unwanted limbs (Just a reminder, don't you know!).



Whether pruning a live or dead branch, it is important to make the pruning cut just outside the tree's branch bark ridge and branch collar. This facilitates natural sealing that helps the tree defend against decay.