

Training Tomorrow's Leaders: Training Leaders in Trees

When I was younger I worked at a nursery that grew trees for the wholesale landscape trade. When they achieved the proper size, they were marketed and sold. It was a great job, and I loved working outdoors. While employed at the farm as the Production Manager, I learned a great deal about producing high quality trees and shrubs. I also learned one of horticulture's most difficult skills, the art of pruning young trees.

One of the tricks I learned was the concept of training a single leader in a shade tree. An ideal young shade tree specimen should have a single straight trunk from the roots to the very uppermost bud. When the tree is too tall to prune then it is allowed to form the rounded multi stemmed canopy we are familiar with in mature shade trees.

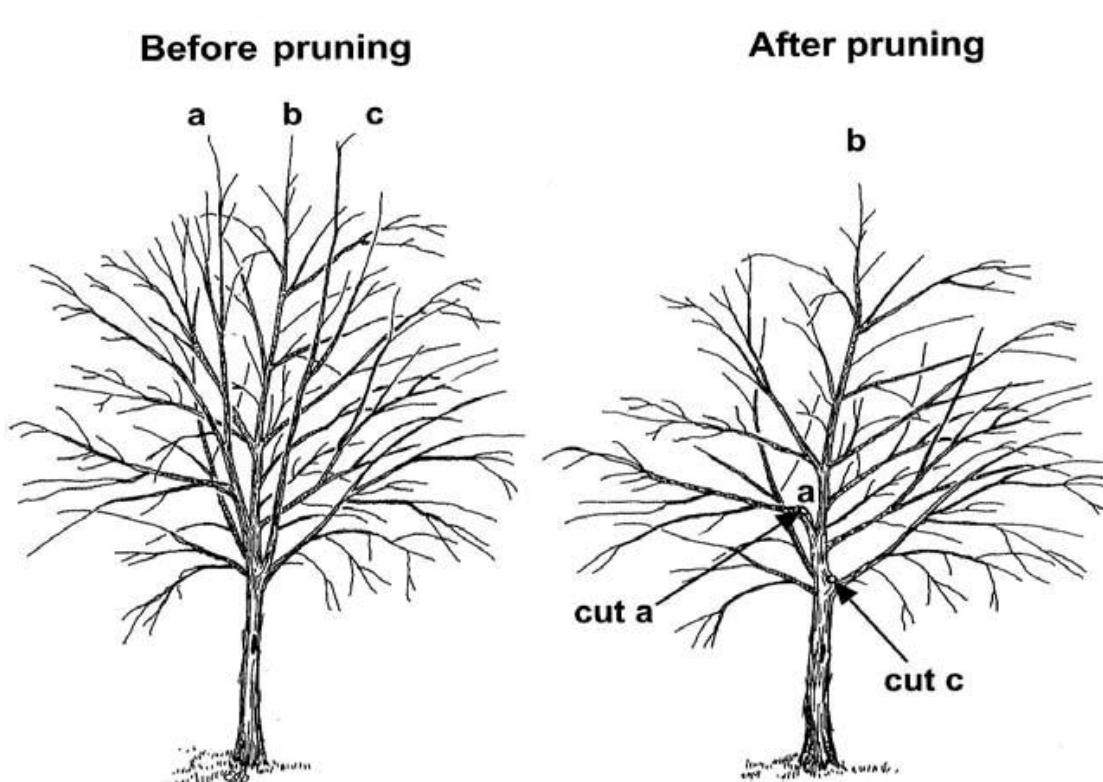
Trees grow at the branch tips where the leading bud suppresses other buds behind it. This bud produces auxin, a plant growth regulator. This chemical allows the bud to maintain its position as leader by reducing the growth of its competitors. Remove this leading bud and the chemical is gone which pushes all of the other now uninhibited buds to assume the leader's former role; this chain reaction results in bushy growth with one or more branches competing for dominance as equals. These equal branches compete for resources and space. Eventually, they can create weak spots in the trunk that can result in the tree splitting.



This tree has codominate leaders that can result in structural flaws that will shorten the tree's life.

We want to aid a single leader to maintain its position in the canopy of the tree. Tree owners can do this by pruning out any competing leaders up to a certain height. This type of pruning is best

done in the winter but may be done throughout the summer. Use a pole saw and prune the other branches at least six inches behind the desired leader.



This diagram depicts the types of cuts we want to make to improve tree structure.

Some trees need more attention than others. Maples are notorious for wanting to form big round canopies very low to the ground; even though it is in their genetic nature to do so, it is better for use to prune them while they are young so they have better structure for the future. Oaks tend to want to form single leaders. Keep a close eye on your young shade trees to maintain single leaders. Spending the time and money to prune young trees now will pay off greatly in the future. If you are unsure of how to do this type of pruning consider consulting a professional arborist.

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