Trees are planted for the long term: give them a little attention in the early years to ensure a vigorous, shapely addition to your garden.

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Formative pruning

A catch-all term for several pruning techniques carried out at planting and in subsequent years, ‘formative pruning’ aims to establish good branch placement and a well-shaped tree with an open centre and, usually, a clear trunk, giving access for mowers and underplanting.

Removing dead, diseased and damaged wood

Good pruning first targets and removes access points for disease. Removing the ‘three Ds’ first enables you to step back and reassess the tree before you take the next step in pruning.

- Remove dead material, cutting back cleanly into healthy wood, ideally to a growth bud.
- Cut out diseased material, sterilising tools between cuts with alcohol. Cut back into healthy wood.
- Finally remove any damaged material, including crossing, thin and weak shoots.
- Dead wood can be safely removed at any time of year.

Tree aftercare

The guidelines on these pages apply primarily to ornamental trees: fruit trees are established in the same way, but pruned and managed differently to maximise fruit production.

Newly planted trees ideally need regular watering in dry spells for three to five years to ensure good root growth (see panel, p56).

After planting a tree, pruning may be necessary to enhance its shape or improve its structure and strength. In the first few years, identify and correct problems with the main framework of the tree – prune early (see panels, right), as this helps avoid future complications. With a young tree, one of the most common tasks is to remove lower branches that begin to interfere with other gardening activities, create shade or block views.

Look out, too, for pests such as aphids and diseases such as canker – they can reduce the vigour of your tree and make establishment slower. If you keep your tree vigorous and healthy, it is less likely to succumb to pests and diseases.

More from the RHS


➤ See The Garden, October 2012, p37 for tree planting recommendations.

Sucker removal

Many trees, shrubs and woody climbers send up suckers from their roots. If these are grafted, suckers may be different to the desired plant. Populus, some Prunus, Rhus and Syringa all sucker freely, taking energy from the tree.

- Use sharp secateurs to remove the sucker as close to the tree as possible (scrape away the soil if necessary). Leave the collar (where the sucker meets the root).
- Ideally, remove suckers in early summer, just after the tree has completed its spring growth.
- Removing suckers when plants are dormant usually results in more many arising the next spring.

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Reducing the canopy

Pruning birches in late summer to avoid sap ‘bleeding’, and cherries mid-summer to avoid silver leaf disease.

Canopy thinning

From three to four years after planting, thin the canopy annually to allow sunlight to penetrate. Good air circulation reduces fungal diseases. Ideally, remove branches where their diameter is small (1.5–6cm / 1–3in).

- Assess the tree shape, removing dead, diseased, damaged wood and crossing branches.
- If there are two main leaders, remove the weaker (double leaders, or ‘co-dominant stems’, are prone to splitting or breaking as trees mature).

Making good cuts

Correct pruning technique minimises infection and decay entering a wound. Decay is most likely if either a branch stub is left or the trunk is damaged.

- If removing a limb, the first cut should be an undercut from below to avoid the weight of the branch tearing the bark and damaging the trunk.
- Make the undercut around 30cm (12in) from the trunk, about a third of the way through the branch.
- The second cut should be made from above, a few centimetres in front of the undercut. The branch should fail leaving a ‘stopped’ stub.
- Cut the stub back to just outside the branch collar (the slight swelling that appears at the junction of trunk and branch). This ensures the cut heals rapidly as the collar forms a callus.

Thinning the canopy

- Rather than shortening branches, prune to a secondary branch. Look for any imbalance and prune out badly placed branches.
- Remove no more than 25 percent of the canopy at a time. The tree should retain a natural habit, and not look like it has been pruned.
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Prune out the ‘three Ds’ first.

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Reducing the canopy

Trees look best when the canopy is intact, however, trees too close to buildings or overhead cables may require reduction. Crown reduction reduces the height and / or spread of the tree canopy by cutting branch tips back to suitable side branches while maintaining a natural shape. Some trees, such as birch, do not respond well to canopy reduction so remove no more than 10–15 percent.

Topping is when the main stem or stems are severed. It is a bad practice, causing tree stress, decay and weakly attached branches. Regrowth after topping can be rapid, worsening shading problems and increasing the risk of a tree falling if the volume and density of the crown increases. The tree can return to its original size in only two or three years after topping.

Pollarding from young age is ideal to reduce tree canopies close to structures. Fraxinus, Tilia, Eucalyptus, and Quercus adapt well to annual pollarding. If this is not practical, remove and replace with a smaller tree.
Tree aftercare

Tree maintenance

Aside from pruning, establishing trees can be helped by irrigation, mulching to conserve soil moisture, and regularly checking that stakes and tree ties are firm but not restricting growth.

Mulching

From initial planting, mulch annually in spring or autumn to suppress weedy competitors and help retain soil moisture.

Organic or inorganic materials can be used; at RHS Garden Wisley we use composted wood chippings, leafmould and well-rotted manure.

Organic materials should be part composted: six-month-old wood chip is ideal.

Mulch should be 7-10cm (3-4in) deep; avoid piling it round the trunk as this can soften the bark.

Checking tree ties and stakes

New trees should be staked until their roots provide good anchorage – this can take several years. If loose, the tree will rock in the wind and its rootball will move, which hinders plant establishment and could even result in death.

Check ties are secure and a padded cushion is between the tree and stake. Rubbing against a stake can create a scar, which leaves the tree open to disease.

Check regularly: ties left too tight cause serious bark damage. Fast-growing trees may need ties loosening every year.

Irrigate regularly

For the first two to three years, irrigate newly planted trees weekly during dry spells in spring and summer. Too much water, and roots will not extend in the search for moisture – but under-irrigation results in slow establishment and symptoms of stress, such as canopy dieback and bark splits on the trunk.

Water directly at the base of the tree and, particularly if the ground is dry, apply slowly to stop it running off. Make sure water has penetrated the soil; on our well-drained soil, we apply two to three full watering cans of water per week to new plantings.

At Wisley we use Treegators (above) – plastic bags that fix around the tree. Their bases are covered in small perforated holes that allow water to seep out gradually (available from PG Horticulture: 01327 828373; www.pghorticulture.co.uk).

Different tree types and their aftercare

Selecting good-quality trees appropriate for the site makes successful aftercare easier. Trees should suit the soil, climate and aspect of their planting site. The right tree type can reduce the need for formative pruning; for a clear stem, for example, buy a standard tree rather than a feathered maiden (see Glossary, right).

Always check the root system: knock the tree out of its pot. Often containerised trees (grown initially in the field then moved to a pot) have restricted root systems and spiralling roots that continue to spiral after planting. Container-grown trees have small, fibrous root systems but also suffer from root spiralling. Avoid trees with a large canopy and small root system, or those obviously pot-bound.

Most trees planted are standards, 2-3m (6½-10ft) tall with trunks 10-18cm (4-7in) in girth. Often slow to establish, they require more aftercare (staking and watering) than smaller, bare-root trees. The bigger a tree is when it is planted, the more aftercare it needs.

If you are patient, a short bare-root whip or feathered maiden will require less water long-term, and establish more quickly than one planted larger.

Take care when buying large bare-root trees: many of their roots can be lost or dry out during lifting and transportation. The small fibrous roots are most important because they absorb water and nutrients. Check the rootball when purchasing to ensure the roots have not dried out or been lost.

Glossary

Canopy: a tree’s branches and leaves.

Formative pruning: pruning for good shape early in a tree’s life.

Bare-root: field-grown trees lifted while dormant with few roots.

Whip: a year-old tree without side branches.

Feathered maiden: a whip with side branches.

Standard: a tree with a lower trunk free of branches to 1-2m (3-6ft).