

Don't Damage Trees With Improper Pruning

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

In recent days I've started to notice some tree pruning activity around town in response to the Thanksgiving weekend ice storm. While there is certainly a need to do some corrective pruning on severely damaged trees, some of the pruning I'm seeing is totally in-appropriate and is damaging the tree even worse than the ice storm did.

Proper pruning of a tree requires a thorough understanding of how a tree grows, how it handles damage to itself and how to enhance the tree's recovery efforts following a traumatic event like an ice or wind storm. The kind of pruning I've been seeing shows a total lack of understanding of all these points.

The specific practice that I've been seeing is known as topping or stubbing. Depending on where you are from it might also be known as hat-racking, heading, rounding over or tipping. Basically the tree is cut back to large stubs and all smaller branches are removed. This becomes a death sentence to the tree. If you are going to cut it back that far, you might as well just take it down completely.

When a tree is topped, virtually all the buds that would have developed leaves this spring are removed as the smaller branches are cut off. The tree needs to live so it quickly activates dormant buds and there is a proliferation of new small growth below the cut where that branch was topped. Normal branch development occurs in a socket of overlapping wood tissues that provides strength and a secure attachment for the developing branch. New shoots that emerge, following a topping, are weakly attached to the outermost layers of parent branches, essentially just under the bark. These branch attachments are weak and often break off, ripping bark off the tree, in future wind and ice storms. Homeowners hoping to minimize future problems have just created more problems by allowing their trees to be topped.

Trees have specialized tissue at normal branch attachments known as a bark ridge collar. When a proper pruning cut is made, this region develops callous tissue that grows over the cut in a few years and seals off the tree interior from decay organisms. When you just randomly cut off a large branch, the tree has no ability to seal over this cut. It becomes a big wound that doesn't heal. Decay organisms can easily enter the tree causing rot that will work its way right down into the trunk, hollowing out large branches and the trunk. Most of the topping that I see being done is on elms and maples. Both of these species tend to grow fast, are inherently weak, and very prone to internal decay. So the very action of topping has just made a bad problem worse.

In many cases, doing nothing would be better than topping the tree. You don't have to be in a hurry to do something. Wait until a trained and certified arborist can come and work on your trees. They understand how a tree grows, how best to clean up a tree after an ice storm and can help you make the decision that perhaps the tree is too badly damaged and it should be removed and replaced with a better quality tree. These are legitimate businesses with the proper insurance to protect you and them.

If someone comes to your house offering to prune your trees, ask them for their proof of insurance and Kansas Arborist Association certification. If they can't supply these, tell them no thank you. Your trees deserve a better fate than being topped. Take care of them and don't make a bad problem worse!