Proper pruning of a young tree is needed to prevent future problems

Following the devastation of our urban forests from the hurricanes of 2004 and 2005, many people have replaced lost or damaged trees. Now is the time to develop and implement a good preventive structural pruning program for your young trees.

Research conducted at the University of Florida clearly indicates that a preventive pruning program can help minimize the risks of tree defects and the subsequent damage poorly structured trees can cause to property and to people.

First it’s important to understand the components of good tree structure. There are three basic things to look for in evaluating a tree’s structure: a single dominant leader, strong branch unions without bark inclusions and a balanced canopy.

Good tree structure starts early with a single trunk and properly spaced branches arranged around the trunk like the spokes of a wheel. Trouble begins when trees grow what are called co-dominant stems. These are stems or trunks that grow from the same point and produce V-shaped connections. Bark (called included bark) is pinched between the stems giving the appearance of a connection. However, the connection between these two stems is weak at best and there is no strong physical bond. As the stems grow, they actually push each other apart and a crack may develop. A good wind storm can cause one or both of these stems to break off. Early correction of these co-dominant stems and encouragement of U-shaped branch connections with good structural attachments will eliminate this problem.

In addition to branch structural problems, a tree’s canopy can become unbalanced. An unbalanced canopy occurs when one side of the tree canopy is much heavier than the other or when most of the canopy weight...
is at the tips of the branches. This can happen from improper pruning practices that remove foliage on the lower and interior parts of the tree. More growth occurs at the tips of the tree making it taller and wider. Often called “lion-tailed” trees due to the branches resembling a long bare tail with a tuft at the end, these trees have all of the leaves growing at the tips of the branches which easily break in wind storms. In addition, after this improper pruning practice occurs, many new sprouts develop with poor connections to the branch.

Structural pruning should be practiced for the first 15 to 25 years of a tree’s life. This is the amount of time required to establish strong structure in the canopy and will help to make the tree more resistant to storm damage.

Although we are typically concerned with aesthetics, the appearance of the tree should be secondary to health and structural concerns. The single greatest structural concern is the large number of co-dominant trunks or main leaders.

So do not ignore your young trees. They need to be trained and pruned to have a strong structure. However, pruning is a double-edged sword, either helping or hurting according to if, where, when, how, and why it is applied. When properly executed, a variety of benefits can occur.

So if you have planted a tree recently, take the time to learn about developing a preventive pruning program. Information is available online from the University of Florida at http://hort.ifas.ufl.edu/woody/pruning.html. For additional information, contact your local Extension Office.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.

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