

Mature Tree Care

Learn procedures specific to a routine maintenance program for mature tree care, including tree inspection, mulching, fertilization, pruning, and tree removal.



Trees serve many purposes in your local community; therefore, homeowners should think of tree care as an investment. A healthy tree increases in value with age and pays big dividends by increasing property values, beautifying surroundings, purifying air, and saving energy by providing cooling shade from summer's heat and protection from winter's wind.

Trees in the city or near houses need regular maintenance to promote health and structural integrity. An effective maintenance program, including regular inspections and necessary follow-up care—mulching, fertilizing, and additional soil management—can identify problems and correct them before they become damaging or fatal.

Tree Inspection

Regular tree inspections can detect changes in a tree's health before a disease, insect, or environmental problem becomes too serious. Mature trees should be inspected at least once a year to assess four characteristics of tree vitality: new leaf or bud formation, leaf size, twig growth, and absence of crown dieback (gradual death of the upper part of the tree).

Growth reduction is a fairly reliable cue that the tree's health has recently changed. An experienced arborist can look at twig growth from past years to determine whether there is a reduction in the tree's typical growth pattern.

In addition to tree health, tree stability is a major concern. There are some tree characteristics you can look for that can indicate structural weakness. These include cavity opening, extensive twig dieback, and the presence of fungal conks (mushrooms or brackets on the trunk).

Any abnormalities found during these inspections should be noted and monitored closely. Report your findings to your local tree care professional for advice on treatment options.

Pruning

- Pruning is often desirable or necessary to remove dead, diseased, or insect-infested branches and to improve tree structure, enhance vitality, or reduce risk.
- The removal of live branches creates a lasting wound; therefore, no branch should be removed without a reason.
- Pruning large trees requires special equipment, training, and experience.
- If pruning requires climbing, the use of a chain or hand saw, or the removal of large limbs, personal safety equipment is a must.

Arborists can assist in performing the job safely and reducing the risk of personal injury and damage to your property. They can also determine which type of pruning is necessary to maintain or improve the health, appearance, and safety of your trees.



Soil Management

- Soil tests are generally required before fertilizing or adjusting pH.
- Urban landscape trees often exist in soils that lack the nutrients, pH (acidity or alkalinity), drainage, or pore space (air and water space) needed for growth and development.
- Fertilization based on plant needs can correct many deficiencies that limit growth. Sometimes soil nutrients may be sufficient, but soil pH levels may prevent plant uptake. In this case, soil amendments, such as sulfur, lime, and even some mulches, can alter soil chemistry and help alleviate plant stress.
- Drainage systems or grading can help correct saturated soil conditions.
- Trenching or earthmoving within the tree's root zone may cause more harm than good.
- Compacted soils can be tilled mechanically or with compressed air to increase porosity and encourage root growth.
- When dealing with a mature tree, have the soil tested for nutrient content and texture. An arborist can arrange to have your soil tested at a soil testing laboratory and recommend treatments based on the results.

Mulching

- Mulching can reduce environmental stress by providing trees with a root environment that has fewer temperature and moisture extremes than the surrounding soil.
- Mulch reduces competition from weeds and grass and prevents mechanical damage by keeping lawn care equipment away from the tree's base.
- Mulches made from plant matter will add nutrients to the soil as they decompose and help improve soil biology.
- Mulch should be placed 2-4 inches (5-10 cm) deep. It should be placed near, but not touching, the trunk and extend to the dripline (furthest extent of the branches).



If you can't mulch the full distance, go as far from the trunk as possible while maintaining the landscape character.

Removal

Although tree removal is a last resort, there are circumstances when it is necessary. Arborists can help decide whether or not a tree should be removed and they possess the skills and equipment to safely and efficiently remove trees. Removal is recommended when a tree:

- Is dead, dying, or considered irreparably hazardous.
- Is causing an obstruction or is crowding and causing harm to other trees and the situation is impossible to correct through pruning.

With maintenance, trees can add aesthetic and economic value to your property. Poorly maintained trees can be a significant liability.

What Is a Certified Arborist?

ISA Certified Arborists® are individuals who have proven a level of knowledge in the art and science of tree care through experience and by passing a comprehensive examination developed by some of the nation's leading experts on tree care. ISA Certified Arborists must also continue their education to maintain their certification. Therefore, they are more likely to be up to date on the latest techniques in arboriculture.

Finding an Arborist

Visit TreesAreGood.org for free tools:

- The "Find an Arborist" tool can help you locate an arborist in your area.
- The "Verify a Credential" tool enables you to confirm whether an arborist has an ISA credential.

Be an Informed Consumer

One of the best methods to use in choosing an arborist is to educate yourself about some of the basic principles of tree care. Visit TreesAreGood.org to read and download all brochures in this series.



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