



## February is Japanese Maple Pruning Time

by Connie Espinoza, UC Master Gardener

My affection for the Japanese maple shows in the number and variety of Japanese Maples in my yard. I have one next to my garage door with succulents growing under it. I have two in containers around my pool. I have two others against my fence for privacy. I also have one on the front wall of my home. I have chosen various colors and styles of the tree.

I have found some great information that I would like to share on how to prune and maintain the growth, size and shape. The goal is to prune to a natural shape and airy canopy.

February is the perfect month to prune, especially for trunk/branch structure. When the leaves have dropped, the structural beauty and natural silhouette of your tree will be more easily found. Also, large cuts heal more easily during winter. Normal garden tools like small pruners, loppers and a small handsaw are all the tools you will need.

Here are some things to consider while pruning and shaping the Japanese maple:

- Know how your Japanese Maple should look. There are two types of tree. The upright varieties have branches that point upward, resembling open fans. The weeping, laceleaf maple has branches that grow to the sides, and downward, with a veil canopy.
- Prune to shape mature trees for the sake of appearance. Removing dead, dying, and diseased wood can be done at any age, but the removal of unappealing branches should wait until after the tree reaches two to three years of age, giving the tree time to grow to its natural shape.
- Prune at the right time. After the tree has lost its leaves in the winter, it's easier to see which branches interfere with the structure of the tree. In late spring, a light pruning will lessen new growth, preventing out-of-control growth. It is best not to prune in early spring, when leaves and bark are tender, nor in the full heat of summer.
- Make good pruning cuts. When making thinning cuts (removing entire branches), remember to cut **just outside** the branch bark collar, which is the ridge of material that fosters natural healing. The branch collar is a distinctive bulge at the base of the branch, where it connects to the trunk. Cutting **into** the branch collar will put your tree at risk. The branch collar seals off the wound, minimizing disease and decay. Proper pruning leaves the branch collar intact.
- Remove diseased, dying and dead stems. Dead wood is often found on the inside bottom of the tree. This



Example of laceleaf tree

keeps the tree healthy and helps stop the spread of disease.

- Remove crossing or intertwining branches. Overlapping branches will interfere with the growth of preferred branches. Cut these overlapping branches at their base, nearest the trunk, instead of just trimming where they overlap.
- Remove weak branches that interfere with strong branches. Clumpy foliage can be caused by branches that are too close to each other. Prune the weaker or less important of the branches.
- Remove branches growing in the wrong direction. Upper branches that are growing downward on an upright tree can be trimmed. On a weeping tree, a limb growing straight or upward would need trimming. Both limbs should be removed at the base next to the trunk, but outside the branch collar.
- Your branches should all have a "Y" shape. Remove the center stem of any "extra" branches to retain the "Y" shape.
- Remove lower branches on upright trees if they hang low enough that walking underneath the tree is difficult. With a laceleaf tree, branches should hang low, although you may remove any that are touching the ground.
- Manage the buds. The direction of the buds determines the direction that the tree will grow. If the buds are growing in an inconvenient direction, they can be hand plucked to redirect the tree's growth direction.
- Keep the shape of your tree balanced. If a thick branch is pruned back to a small side branch, the shape of the tree will be unbalanced and out of proportion.
- Do not remove a limb with a diameter that is more than half the size of the tree's trunk. Any limb with a diameter that is more than 1/4 to 1/3 the size of the tree trunk should be kept.
- Never remove more than 1/5 of the tree's crown, or more than 30% of the tree each year. Removing tree growth can stimulate excessive growth and cause stress to the tree. Enough foliage should be retained to enable the tree to absorb nutrients.



Example of an upward tree

By examining the tree from all angles, (top to bottom, top to base, and side to side) you can determine the desired shape of the tree. Shrinking the tree to fit a location by pruning should be avoided. If the tree does not fit the location, it should be removed or relocated. Just because Japanese maples are small trees does not mean they will fit under a roof eave. A Japanese maple's best feature is its delicate, arching sweep of branches. Trying to prune it into a lollipop shape to fit near an entryway destroys its beautiful aesthetic.

When sunlight dapples through the leaves of your Japanese maple and creates a watercolor, see-through, dazzling effect of color, you'll be happy you took your time to prune your tree into a work of art.

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