

Pruning 100yr Old Trees (and those not that old !)

If you find yourself standing in your yard holding this tutorial and looking up at one of the infamous 'umbrella trees', consider yourself one of the privileged few who own and get the chance to prune one of these Edsel's. Yep, these trees exhibit everything you could do wrong in pruning an apple tree. These trees were on seedling rootstock, so they were pruned to keep them from becoming giants. In the process, they became umbrellas with incredibly vigorous annual 'watersprouts'. So where do you start?

In some sense you need to further digest the principles of training and pruning. Branch placement, branch angle, branch caliper; these are the keystones to successful pruning. They are the rules to pruning a slender spindle, an open center tree, or an umbrella tree. So let's try and walk through the process on these mature trees. If your trees haven't been pruned in awhile, then the first year should be dedicated to several large cuts to either bring the top down or to open up light bays. The general rule is to never cut more than 25% out of a tree in a year.

Several big cuts will not impact the trees re-suckering tendency compared to a lot of little cuts. The first year stick to your major big cuts. You will want to develop a mental or written 3-5 year plan. Each consecutive year you will focus more on detail.

- Year 1 - big structural cuts.
- Year 2 - thinning out major side branches.
- Year 3 - thinning more side branches.
- Year 4 - mostly detail pruning on two and three year old wood.

Where you have lots of one year shoots suckering, try cutting out all of the really big ones, leave all of the one year shoots that have some angle to them and that are not too strong in growth (under 2' in length). You can even bend these down to the horizontal like we do with the slender spindle. One shoot every 12" works.

With the remainder of shoots evaluate how many of these shoots you can thin out. Remember the goal is to let light into the shoots you are leaving. If you can leave a small collection of safety valves every 6' or so, you would have several 1-year old shoots, several 2 year old shoots and one or two 3 year old shoots. Do not even think about tipping these. Let them grow with wild abandon.

Every year you will cycle out the 3 year old shoots. They are easy to tell because they should have been loaded with beautiful fruit. But, show no mercy here, cut them out at the base. Your 2 year old shoots- reduce the number to 2 or so and same with the one year old shoots that are now the 2 year olds. Got the idea? you rotate out the suckers, cutting older ones, letting the younger ones grow.

These mature trees have a lot of horsepower in them. Most of these trees were not allowed to grow to the height needed to maintain a balanced tree. Cycling that vigor into shoots will let the rest of the tree begin to come into balance. And the weak shoots with some horizontal angle, you won't believe the volume of fruit they will produce. What if there is still a lot of vigor in your tree? If this is the case then you will want to strategically choose several of these 3 year old shoots and let them develop into an upper tier of branches in the tree. Give the new upper tier of branches at least 3' or more above the lower tier of branches.



Same limb as above, pruned. Angled shoots are left to mature into fruit wood. We also left some of the strong upright shoots to soak up some of the tree's vigor. **Do not tip these shoots!** They can be removed as two year old shoots,