

**NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE
CONSERVATION PRACTICE STANDARD**

TREE/SHRUB PRUNING

(Acre)

CODE 660

DEFINITION

The removal of all or part of selected branches, leaders or roots from trees and shrubs.

PURPOSE

- Improve the appearance of trees or shrubs, e.g., ornamental plants and Christmas trees.
- Improve the quality of wood products.
- Improve the production of plant products, e.g., nuts, fruits, boughs and tips.
- Reduce fire and/or safety hazards.
- Improve the growth and vigor of understory plants.
- Adjust the foliage and branching density or rooting length for other specific intents, such as wind and snow control, noise abatement, access control, and visual screens and managing competition.
- Improve health and vigor of woody plants e.g. disease, insect and injury management.

CONDITIONS WHERE PRACTICE APPLIES

This practice applies on any area with trees or shrubs [needing pruning](#).

CRITERIA

General Criteria Applicable to All Purposes

The pruning and shearing method and timing will match the limitations of the site, soils and plants and minimize damage to the residual plant bole/stems and limbs. For a high degree of removal of crown foliage, pruning and shearing

shall be done in two or more timed intervals to minimize plant stress.

Debris and vegetative material left on the site after treatment will not present an unacceptable fire or pest hazard or interfere with the intended purpose and other management activities.

Burning of removed vegetation shall follow the criteria and considerations listed in the Prescribed Burning (338).

Ground vegetation and/or conditions must be left in a manner to address erosion and other natural resource concerns to acceptable levels.

Disinfect pruning and shearing tools to minimize the spread of pathogens.

[Criteria in the associated conservation practice specification sheet will be followed.](#)

CONSIDERATIONS

Pruning and shearing should be timed to minimize disturbance to seasonal wildlife activities.

Review the estimated cost and projected economic benefits of the project before starting a pruning or shearing project.

Branches removed may be used for other products.

[Where appropriate, brush piles left on-site will provide wildlife cover.](#)

Conservation practice standards are reviewed periodically, and updated if needed. To obtain the current version of this standard, contact the Natural Resources Conservation Service [State Office](#) or visit the [electronic Field Office Technical Guide](#).

PLANS AND SPECIFICATIONS

Specifications for applying this practice shall be prepared for each site and recorded using approved specification sheets, job sheets, technical notes and narrative statements in the conservation plan, or other acceptable documentation.

Separate specifications for improvement of Lumber Quality, Aesthetics/Ornamentals, Christmas Trees and Apple Trees for Wildlife are provided in Attachment 1.

OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE

Periodically inspect plant condition and do additional pruning if needed.

REFERENCES

Bedker, O'Brien and Mielke. 1995. How to Prune Trees. USFS Northeastern Area State and Private Forestry Publication NA-FR-01.

University of Maine Cooperative Extension. 2004. Wild Apple Trees for Wildlife. Bulletin 7126.

Attachment 1 – Vermont Supplemental Specifications

1. IMPROVEMENT OF LUMBER QUALITY

- Species – On good to excellent sites, any species of hardwood or softwood may be pruned when it is considered economically prudent. In general, pruning is limited to white pine and to a lesser extent, red pine (for poles). White and red pine may be pruned on outwash soils rated fair to excellent for productivity.
 - Size – Trees 3 to 8 inches DBH (diameter at breast height or 4.5 feet above the ground) and 12 feet or more in height may be pruned. Trees as large as 10 " DBH may be pruned on good to excellent sites if they are to be grown to 20" DBH or larger.
 - Number – Up to 150 well-distributed dominant and codominant crop trees per acre may be pruned. Select good quality, vigorous, reasonably straight trees.
 - Length of Bole Pruned – Pruning will be done in order to produce 8-16 feet sawlogs in two-foot, even increments i.e., 8', 10', 12', 14', and 16' logs. One additional foot of bole will be pruned to allow for stump and trim allowances.
 - Method – Limbs will be cut as close to the bole as possible without injuring or removing the collar of tissue at the base of the branch (branch collar). Live branches greater than 2" diameter will not be removed. Dead branches of any size may be pruned.
 - From 1/3 to 1/2 of total tree height will always be left in live crown.
 - Pruning saws are preferable when pruning for improved lumber quality. However, any tool may be used which removes the branch and does not leave a stub or damage the branch collar.
 - Time to Prune – Pruning of softwoods may be done anytime. However, dormant season is usually preferable. Hardwoods should be pruned only during the dormant season.
- Other Considerations – Thinning must be performed prior to or shortly after pruning to promote fast growth and healing of wounds.
 - To prevent wind damage, trees along the windward edge of a stand should not be pruned (or thinned).
 - Use of tree pruning paint is not necessary or recommended because of labor and cost factors. The value of painting is aesthetics.

2. AESTHETICS/ORNAMENTALS

- Remove diseased, dead and dying limbs. Also remove any crossing branches on young trees and shrubs.
- Remove limbs which are a hazard to the public. In areas of human use such as campgrounds, they are to be removed to a height of 8 feet. On bridle paths, limbs are to be removed to a height of 12 feet. On snowmobile or cross-country ski trails limbs are pruned to a height of 8 feet.
- Remove tree limbs which interfere with the growth of flowering shrubs.
- Remove limbs which interfere with the viewing of a scenic area.
- Tree limbs will be cut flush with the branch collar (see 1), or at an angle to allow water to drain. Large limbs are to be undercut to prevent peeling or stripping of the tree's bark.
- For deciduous shrubs, it is important to cut slightly above a bud with the cut sloping away from it at a gentle angle. When hard pruning, cut growth down to new growing points at the woody base of the shrub.
- Removing one-third of old growth, or of wood which has flowered in the previous season, encourages vigorous flowering and rejuvenation of older shrubs.

- Certain young shrubs needing time to become established will gain a more compact shape and finer foliage if the previous year's growth is cut back by half in early spring.
- A broken, jagged limb 3-6" beyond branch collar will usually result in a cavity which may result in improved habitat for cavity nesting birds and animals.
- Cut limbs are to be removed, chipped for wood mulch, lopped so they lie close to the ground, or used to construct brush piles for wildlife. Fall Balsam Fir pruning can be used for making wreaths, etc. (also known as "tipping").
- Use of tree wound dressing or "pruning paint" is not necessary but may be desirable for aesthetics.

3. CHRISTMAS TREES

- Trees planted for Christmas trees are sheared and basal pruned to enhance their appearance and increase sale value. Trees are sheared to develop the desired shape and density (usually an inverted cone and moderately dense).
- Pruning for pines is to be done in late spring after elongation is nearly complete, while the leader is soft and succulent. Approximately one-half of the new growth is removed. Spruce and fir may be pruned anytime of the year.
- Multiple leaders are to be removed when shearing. Leave only one strong leader.
- Leaders are usually cut back 12 to 14 inches for pines and 8 to 12 inches for spruce and fir. Spruce should be cut back to within approximately 1/4 to 3/8 inches of a single live bud.
- After final shearing, trees are to be allowed to grow one season before harvest.

- Any tool may be used which produces a clean cut without tearing the branch or stripping the bark. Examples are: hand clippers, hedge trimmers, various knives, and sickles.

4. APPLE TREES FOR WILDLIFE

- Examine the tree and remove all multiple stems, leave one main, healthy stem uncut. Cut the multiple stems as close to the ground as possible.
- Apple trees should be pruned in late winter or early spring before leaf out and after danger of severe cold has passed.
- Remove all dead branches from the tree. Disease and insect-infested branches should be burned.
- Remove approximately one-third of the remaining live growth. Try to open up thick clusters of branches. Clip off one or two feet from the ends of vigorous side branches. Do not remove the vigorous spur branches on the side of larger branches, this is where most of the apples are born.
- If the tree is a young sapling, the top can be cut off to encourage side branching.
- When cutting competing woody vegetation (releasing) around an apple tree, leave some vegetation on the North side of the tree to provide cover to wildlife frequenting the tree.