

A Cut Above

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Luis Estrada, a foreman for Bartlett Tree Service, prunes a Sycamore Maple at Chepstow Mansion on Narragansett Avenue in Newport.

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Landscapers and arborists are racing to beat spring as they treat trees and shrubs for winter damage and prepare the plants for the future.

Late winter is the time for pruning many kinds of trees.

"We prune trees for three reasons," says David Mendell, "safety, the health of the plant, and aesthetics. Sometimes, it's for all three."

(Pruning also can encourage more fruit and flowers on such plants as apple trees and rose bushes.)

An arborist for Bartlett Tree Experts, Mendell is standing beneath one of the most beautiful trees in Newport's urban forest, a 130- to 140-year-old copper beech at Chepstow, a mansion on Narragansett Avenue. A crew of climbers is in the tree's crown, removing dead wood to prevent disease and to give the plant's living limbs the space and sunlight they need.

Working in winter, before leaves appear, allows a professional pruner or a do-it-yourselfer to see a plant clearly, says David Renzi, owner or Out in Front Horticulture and a lecturer on pruning.

How do you know which plants need a clip?

Ask an arborist, Mendell advises. "Once a year, it's good to have an arborist walk through your yard and see what needs to be done. It's free." Many licensed arborists, horticulturists and landscapers will evaluate trees and shrubs during the winter and create a program of care. Many of them are listed on the Rhode Island Nursery & Landscape Association website, rinla.com.

The Ocean State Libraries system has many books about pruning, and there are several websites that offer good advice, including one produced by the non-profit Arbor Day Foundation at arboraday.org.

How do you know when to call in a professional for pruning? "Any time

your feet are going to leave the ground," Mendell says. "A ladder and a chain saw [or any other sharp tool] is not a good combination."

Renzi says it's also a good idea to call a professional when foul weather has torn off limbs that have taken bark off the tree's trunk. Extraordinary wounds need extraordinary care.

Whether winter pruning is done by a professional or a do-it-yourselfer, it's critical to understate each plant's natural habits and to honor them. For example, Mendell says, "You don't want to make a weeping tree look like an umbrella."

Dana Millar, an experienced horticulturist, says he still keeps reference books in his truck so he can study the habits of trees and shrubs before he begins to prune them. Occasionally, however, the owner of Dana Designs says it's necessary to alter a plant's natural habits. He cites the hollies that line a path at Theatre By The Sea, where he cares for the landscape. The hollies had spread into the path, narrowing it. Millar had to prune the plant's path-side branches because, he said, "The romance of that walk is to be able to hold hands there."

When pruning a tree, arborists first remove:

- Branches that are broken or diseased. They are dangerous because they can fall.
- Branches that are crossing or rubbing other branches.
- Branches that are directly over others, blocking sunlight and air circulation.
- Branches that are growing toward the center of the tree.

Pruning a tree means wounding it, and wounds can lead to infections, but many of the bugs and other organisms that infect trees are dormant during cold weather: another reason for winter pruning, Mendell says.

It's important to cut limbs properly, so the wounds heal quickly and completely.

Look for the "collar" of a branch, an enlarged area near the trunk, and cut the branch off at the collar, not at the trunk. The collar contains tissue that will protect the plant. Cutting at the trunk may create a wound that invites wood-decaying fungus.

When in doubt, call in a licensed arborist.