

Now That Your Trees are Bare

Published 11/5/19 – image of leafless tree, vintage drawing from publicdomainpictures.net

OK, so your tree's leaves have fallen which reveal what was hard to see before – limbs, branches, and twigs. Who knows what your time will be like come spring so now is a great time to closely examine your trees' structures and see if there's anything needing attention. One of the main concerns will be form of the tree but first there's a couple of things to check on that may change how the tree looks. If you don't trust yourself with any of the following suggestions, contact a reliable landscape maintenance or tree trimming company for help.



First, look for signs of disease which would manifest itself as cracks, cankers, or oozing areas on trunks and larger branches. Depending on the severity and location of the damage some pruning may be necessary. Insect damage is another concern and can sometimes be identified by holes in the trunk or larger limbs. However most insect damage is more easily identified when the insects, their waste, or their predators (i.e., woodpeckers and other birds) are present.

Much more easily observed are broken branches. Many of these can be hidden by foliage during the growing season. Broken limbs cause irregular ripping of the wood allowing large areas for insects and disease to enter the tree's system. Broken limbs need pruning back to a crotch or branch collar. Proper pruning of broken branches is important not only to the health but also the aesthetics of the tree. There's a guideline section in the 2019 edition of the City of Pierre Tree Planting Guide on how to prune both evergreens and deciduous trees.

A product of broken branches are “widow makers” or the broken ends of branches that get caught up in higher branches and have yet to make it to the ground. Sometimes hard to see when the leaves are on the tree these are easily visible once the leaves have fallen. No matter if there are or are not leaves on the tree, all of these should be removed immediately once seen. These can be extremely heavy and could kill the unfortunate soul who's at the wrong place at the wrong time.

Crossed branches can eventually lead to the branches rubbing together which then leads to open wounds similar to broken branches mentioned above. With crossed branches there's generally one branch that's not growing the direction you want: maybe it's in parallel with a larger branch, maybe it emerged on the opposite side of the canopy crossing several branches getting to the other side, or maybe it just has a weird turn or twist due to injury that causes it to come into contact with another branch. Remove that branch according to the pruning guidelines.

So now all diseased, broken, hanging, and crossed branches have been removed. All of the problem areas are removed, now it's just a matter of pruning for shape and as required by City ordinances. All limbs over sidewalks should have a minimum of 8' of clearance; over the curb it's 12'. That part is easy. Trimming for form needs some experience, artistic interpretation, and knowledge of how the tree will grow. Hard to explain trimming for form with 500 or so words, so again, If you don't trust yourself with this, contact a reliable landscape maintenance or tree trimming company for help.

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