

Winter Time Tree Care Tips

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Winter means it's time to put away our lawnmowers, edgers, trimmers and except for a few leaves to rake, relax from yard work until next spring. Right? Wrong! Though our hot summer labor is finally at rest, winter simply means changing our focus to accommodate the cold weather needs of our trees.

The key is to not be fooled when your tree loses its leaves and is in apparent dormancy. This doesn't mean that your tree is in hibernation and "resting." There is still plenty of activity going on inside the plant that is both dynamic and critical to its growth and survival. Throughout winter your tree is busy consolidating energy reserves in preparation for next season's growth. It is also extending its root system to better adsorb essential water and elements. The key for the homeowner is to do just enough during the next few months to improve the tree's subtle yet effective winter strategy.

1. **Apply and/or Maintain Mulch.** Spread up to two inches of fine mulch over the tree's root zone, followed by two to four inches of coarser mulch. Using composted organic mulch will do more to protect roots and foster underground activity than almost anything else. Avoid piling mulch against tree trunk. A well-mulched tree will help conserve soil moisture, regulate soil temperature, and provide natural conditions for healthy organic activity.
2. **Selectively Prune.** Winter is the best time to prune a tree for structure, remediation, and function. Keep in mind that good pruning is as much an art as it is a science. It requires understanding how trees really work. You can learn a lot by visit Extension web sites to

learn terms important to pruning such as *branch collar* and *compartmentalization of decay*. A general rule of thumb for normal pruning is to remove no more than 10 percent of the live crown. In cases where storm damage occurs, try leaving at least 75 percent of the live crown. Never flush cut or have a tree topped. Always prune to prevent problems and encourage good tree structure, especially when training a young tree. Always use a qualified arborist to prune larger trees.

3. **Plant New Trees.** Few things are more rewarding than planting a tree, while nothing can be more discouraging than to see a newly planted tree fail. To give your new tree the best possible chance for survival, start with the planting hole. A proper hole should be two to three times the diameter of the root ball and no deeper than the depth of the root ball. Next, remove the container, pull back the “burlap,” and cut any wires or binding material away from trunk. Position the tree in a way that takes into account future growth, obstacles, and desired views. Backfill with original soil. Tamp backfill and build shallow rim around hole. Place two to four inches of organic mulch and then water each week of dry weather the first growing season.
4. **Avoid Damaging Your Trees.** This goes for year round. Always think twice when altering your landscape or when making construction changes around your home. Trees can suffer when injured during home and landscape “improvements.” In fact, it is one of the leading causes of urban tree problems in Alabama. Always plan and carry out construction activities in a way that avoids tree injuries both above and below ground.