

Pruning Oaks, Elms and Ash Trees

There are several tree species that require special timing for when it is best to prune as a result of various tree insects and disease concerns. These guidelines have been created by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (oak wilt, Dutch elm disease) and the Department of Agriculture (emerald ash borer).

For oaks it is very important that if you plan to have any pruning done that you do so between November 1st and no later than April 1st to avoid the risk of spreading oak wilt disease. Oak wilt is a fungus that is spread via grafted root systems from infected oak trees or overland by sap beetles that are attracted to the scent of freshly cut oaks. Red and northern pin oaks (pointy leaves) are the most susceptible to oak wilt and can wilt and die within as little as 2-6 weeks once infected. White, swamp white and bur oaks (round lobed leaves) have more resistance to oak wilt but are not immune. The high risk period for oak wilt runs from April 1st to July 1st, with a low risk period from July 1st to November 1st, making November through March the safest time to prune oaks. If you absolutely must prune an oak from April through October (i.e. storm damage cleanup) make sure to immediately paint over any pruning wounds with latex or acrylic spray paint. The DNR maintains an oak wilt risk widget which changes depending on the season. This widget is on the city forestry webpage.

For elms it is generally best to prune while dormant to reduce the risk of elm bark beetles finding fresh pruning cuts while they are active during the growing season. Dormant pruning of elms also ensures that elm wood that can serve as a breeding site for elm bark beetles is destroyed prior to the beetles' active period. While not absolutely necessary to avoid summer pruning of elms, if possible it is best to wait until winter unless the tree suffers some storm damage. An exception can be made for younger fast growing elms that often require formative pruning on an annual basis, taking precedence over any specific time of the year to prune.

Like oaks, ash trees (green, white and black) have a specific window during the year when the Minnesota Department of Agriculture specifies pruning. Because of the emerald ash borer (EAB) active period from early May until late September, it is best to only prune and move ash wood from October through April during the EAB no fly (dormant) period unless absolutely necessary. EAB was found in Robbinsdale in April of 2018 so it is important to heed this guideline in order to avoid spreading these insects around town. It takes several years of insect feeding activity before EAB damage can be detected from the ground. Thus, assume that if you have an untreated ash tree it has at least a few EAB larvae present in the canopy that are best not to be moved where it can invade uninfected ash trees. Note that mountain ash (American, European, showy) are not in the same family as ash trees and that mountain ash do not have the same pruning window restrictions.

The dormant season is actually the best time to prune most trees since insects and diseases are not active and it is easier to assess branching structure. If you choose to hire an arborist for any tree work the City of Robbinsdale maintains a list of licensed tree contractors, which can be found at <http://www.robbinsdalemn.com/city-government/city-departments/forestry-copy-1303>. If you have any questions please feel free to contact the City Forester/Natural Resources Specialist at 763-531-1273 or at spapiz@ci.robbinsdale.mn.us.