

Pruning Water Sprouts and Suckers

The trees are waking up from winter dormancy and as the spring progresses we will begin to see more flowering trees and leaves breaking out of their cozy buds. When trees don't have leaves yet it is a great time to look at the structure of the tree. Some things you may notice on your trees during this last bit of time before they are covered in leaves are water sprouts and suckers.

Water sprouts and suckers are vigorous, vertical shoots that grow off the tree on either branches (water sprouts) or at the base of the tree from the roots or along the trunk (suckers). These vegetative branches are generally a response to stress and should be removed for a few reasons.

1. Water sprouts and suckers interfere with normal growth and take away water and nutrients that should go to healthy parts of the tree. This could put the tree under more stress and result in more suckers and water sprouts.
2. Water sprouts and suckers grow quickly which makes them weakly connected to the tree. This could make them easier to break off in a storm which could damage the healthy parts of the tree.
3. They detract from the appearance of the tree. Suckers at the base of the tree look sloppy and can prevent you from being able to walk up to or mow around your tree. Water sprouts grow straight upwards from branches which can make the canopy crowded and tangled looking, blocks light for photosynthesis, and prevents good air circulation within the canopy.

While most tree pruning is done during the dormant season, water sprouts and suckers can and should be removed whenever you see them. Suckers are easy to see anytime, but water sprouts are most visible when there are no leaves on the tree. Prune either of these types of shoots off as close to the trunk/branch as possible so there is only a small scar for the tree to heal. If you spot this shoots early enough, you can easily break them off flush to the tree without the use of pruners.

When pruning trees and shrubs, it is a good practice to disinfect your pruners between uses to prevent the potential spread of disease; rubbing alcohol will do the trick. It is also best to make sure your pruners are sharp so you can make a clean cut which will be easier to heal.

The sooner you can get rid of water sprouts and suckers the better! Your tree will be able to put more energy into growing healthy stems and branches, and your tree will look a lot more pleasing to the eye!