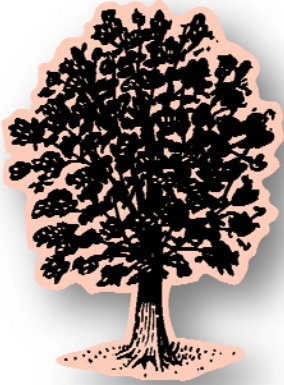


The Value of Pruning Live Oaks Properly

by Mark Duff



Live oaks are by far the most common tree species in Hollywood Park (HP) and neighboring Hill Country Village (HCV). Nearly all of the live oaks you see were here before HP and HCV were envisioned. They represent roughly 90 percent of the canopy cover and add significant value to our properties and landscapes. Between HCV and HP there are at least 1600 residential units with an average value of \$40,000 of live oaks per property (my estimate), for a total of \$64,000,000. Therefore, this is an investment to be managed wisely. Pruning is the most common and costly tree maintenance practice. When done properly, it can be considered an asset to your landscape. Improper pruning creates liabilities.

While volumes can be written about pruning, this article will focus on the two most important pruning issues that have been affecting live oaks in HP for the past 50 years - thinning and lion-tailing. The topic of ball moss, while also related to pruning, will follow this article in the series.

Thinning involves removing entire trees from the landscape. Live oaks typically grow from root sprouts in groups called “motts.” As trees grow, they occupy more space and begin to crowd each other as they compete for light. This is why you see the outer trees of the motts bending toward the sky. They remind us of a bouquet. When the trees are confined in motts, they are not able to spread out their branches like the solitary live oak you would see out in a pasture, with its branches touching the ground and arching back upward. When the canopies of rapidly growing trees begin to close upon each other, it may be time to do some thinning, rather than to start cutting competing branches off. Most landowners have favored the latter, since people just don’t like to cut trees down. Doing so will, however, allow the residual trees to continue to develop well-tapered lower branches and spread out, making more attractive and healthier specimens. You can select your final landscape trees from the motts by favoring those trees that are in the best location and that are developing a well spaced scaffold limb structure. It is important to thin around trees that are relatively young and growing vigorously. An older mature tree may be slow to respond with new shoots that will eventually occupy the openings in the crowns. Sometimes it is not possible to remove a competing tree without drastically disrupting the architecture of the “bouquet.” In these cases, it is best to not thin them out.

Lion-tailing as it is known in the tree care industry, is a common pruning practice in HP and throughout the range of live oaks. It is the removal of all interior secondary branches along the main trunks and scaffold limbs, as well as removing live twigs and foliage along the secondary branches. This gives the tree the appearance of a lion tail – hence the name. It is usually done by tree workers when homeowners request that all the ball moss be removed. Unfortunately ball moss cannot be removed completely and easily by hand or pole saw. Much is attached to live branches; therefore interior foliage gets removed in the process. Also, the sprouts that emerge along the main branches and trunks (called water sprouts) are not aesthetically pleasing to landowners, who then have them removed, further promoting the lion-tailing syndrome.

Lion-tailing trees is not recommended for several and varied reasons. First, by removing the interior foliage along a branch or trunk, very little stem taper will take place. This creates weak branches that are subject to fracture during wind storms and ice loads. Second, by removing interior foliage the branches and trunk get exposed to direct sunlight which promotes the development of many fast-growing water sprouts. Notice the trees in the Park that have not been pruned this way and you will see few water sprouts. Third, lion-tailing usually involves removing too much foliage. Trees need their leaves. After all, leaves are the tree's "food factories." Removing more than 1/3 of the foliage, especially from a mature tree, is not recommended. Many of our live oaks are already too thin and the trees are just trying to put on new foliage to compensate for this shortage. Fourth, removal of interior foliage stresses trees. During hot sunny days the outer leaves on trees begin to shut down in an effort to conserve water and stop making sugars necessary for maintaining good health. A tree whose interior foliage has been retained will, however, remain active during these heat waves. Finally, it makes the trees look unnatural and goofy, as if they belonged in a Dr. Seuss book.

When to prune: In general, the best time to prune trees and shrubs is during the dormant season (winter). However, because of the oak wilt epidemic, oaks should be pruned during the hottest days of summer "dog days" or during the coldest days of winter. Regardless of the season, painting pruning wounds on oaks as soon as they are created is the best precautionary measure. Wounds on other tree species should not be painted.

Why prune: As trees mature, interior and lower branches get shaded out and die. Sometimes trees outgrow their intended space and begin to interfere with structures and right-of-ways and thus, require pruning. There must always be a good reason to prune. It is unacceptable to prune because your neighbor did it, there is a "special deal" going on along your street or it's just pruning "season."

How: The best pruning job on an open-grown tree will not be noticed. That is because only branches in the "3-Ds" (dead, dying, and diseased) category are removed, stubs are not left to see and no flush against the trunk cuts are made. Minimize the amount of green removed. Retain the upper 2/3 of the water sprouts along the trunks and branches. Eventually you can remove ones that are crowded and keep some that will eventually turn into larger branches.

Who should prune: While it is ok for a landowner to do basic light pruning, if you need to get off the ground to reach a branch, it is best to call on a professional. According to national safety statistics, chainsaw operators have higher accident rates than nearly any other occupation. A good tree care service will make safe and proper pruning cuts. Make sure contractors carry workers' compensation and liability insurance. Since this insurance is expensive, a company will use it as a marketing tool and be proud to show it to you. Ask to see current copies of the policies. If they cannot provide them, find someone else. One way to find a good arborist is to search the International Society of Arboriculture's website list of local Certified Arborists at: www.isa-arbor.com