

## **LOCAL GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE GUIDE**

# **Tree Pruning in the Critical Area Buffer**

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**Critical Area Commission**

**Chesapeake and Atlantic Coastal Bays**

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### **Purpose:**

The pruning of trees in the Critical Area Buffer is permitted for safety, health, and aesthetic purposes. Pruning can be used to remove branches that could fall and cause injury or property damage, that obstruct lines of sight on roads, or that interfere with utility lines. In some instances, pruning is necessary to maintain the health of trees and promote the development of a strong structure. Pruning for aesthetics related to maintaining or creating a view of the water is permitted, but must be done carefully to ensure that the health of the tree is not adversely affected and that the water quality and habitat benefits of the riparian Buffer are not impaired in any way. The purpose of this Local Government Assistance Guide is to convey some basic guidelines for pruning that are acceptable practices on most properties. In Maryland, trees in the Buffer should be pruned by a licensed tree expert. Before starting any work, the property owner should contact the local planning office to determine what permits or approvals are required. This varies depending on the size and scope of the pruning project. Also, please note that these are general guidelines. If a site is under the care of a certified arborist for long term management, a site specific plan could replace these standards.

### **Applicability:**

This guidance is applicable on all properties with a Critical Area Buffer adjacent to tidal waters, tidal wetlands, and tributary streams.

### **Standards:**

A Buffer Management Plan may be required depending on the scope of the work and the size of the area. In general, if live branches are to be pruned or invasive species are to be removed, and three or more trees will be affected, you should contact your local planning office to determine what, if any, authorization is needed. In many cases, a Simplified Buffer Management Plan may be sufficient.

Any tree pruning, whether in the Buffer or not, should be done with the health of the tree in mind. Poorly designed or executed pruning can be more harmful than no pruning at all. For their own protection, property owners should hire only licensed tree experts (if not doing the work themselves) and for more complicated jobs, a certified arborist should be consulted. Such experts can discuss the owner's objectives and give recommendations on means of accomplishing them. There should be a reason behind every cut that is made. Below is a list of various pruning techniques that can be used to achieve owner objectives, improve the health of individual trees and preserve the valuable functions of the Buffer. These are listed in the order of effort, expertise and expense involved.

Canopy "cleaning" is the removal of dead, dying, diseased, or broken branches from a tree. This type of pruning can generally be done anytime of the year, as needed. Remove these branches as close to the trunk as possible, but leave the collar (the ring of wood tissue that grows around the base of branches) if one is present.

(No more than!)  
≤ 20% of live crown removed during any single operation/growing season

Next, **crown thinning** is the selective removal of branches to improve the health of a tree or trees by increasing light and air penetration in the tree canopy or to the ground below. The intent is to maintain or develop a tree's structure and form. **In general, no more than one-quarter of the living crown should be removed at any one time.** The first branches to remove are those that rub or cross another and those that compete with the central trunk leader. The branches removed should be evenly distributed throughout the canopy and along the trunk to maintain a stable structure. This is especially important for open-grown or isolated trees that may have a very large canopy, be exposed to high winds during storm events, and located in soils along the shoreline that can become unstable when saturated.

**Crown raising** or "limbing up" involves removing branches from the ground up to the bottom of the tree crown or canopy. This is often done to provide access around the tree, provide a view, and improve the form and appearance of the tree. **Always maintain live branches on at least the top two-thirds of a tree's total height.** Remember that tree care is a long term activity and removing many lower branches all at once can lead to trunk defects and decay. Trees that are improperly pruned above the lower third are top heavy and often become unstable during storm events. The risk of the tree falling is intensified when the tree is tall with a relatively slender trunk, the canopy is wet and heavy, and the ground is saturated.

**Crown reduction** pruning should only be used as a last resort and is best left to professionals. It is a method used to reduce the height of a tree by cutting select branches back to laterals (smaller branches). It is the only alternative to "topping" as it helps maintain the form and structural integrity of the tree, while also reducing the size.

The above standards are applicable to most situations. However, there are instances where more significant pruning should occur. Examples include pruning to alleviate safety concerns, to provide utility line clearance and to restore a tree's natural shape after storm damage. For such an instance, the property owner should consult with a certified arborist to ensure more significant pruning will not harm the tree or impact the functions of the Buffer.

Pruning cuts should be made so that only branch tissue is removed. Every effort should be made to ensure that trunk tissue is not damaged.

### **Unacceptable pruning methods:**

**Topping** and **tipping** are pruning practices that harm trees and should not be used. Topping, the pruning of large upright branches between smaller branches, is sometimes done to reduce the height of a tree. Tipping is a practice of cutting lateral (horizontal) branches between nodes to reduce the width of a tree. Both of these practices result in an abundance of weakly attached sprouts and decaying branches. They also lead to top-heavy "lollipop" trees, if not the death of the tree entirely.

### **When to prune**

The best time of the year to prune depends upon the type of tree and the extent of pruning proposed. Dead or dying branches can be removed any time of the year. Hardwood trees and shrubs with spring flowers (redbud, dogwood, etc.) should be pruned immediately after flowering. Hardwood trees and shrubs without showy flowers should be pruned in the dormant season (typically November through February). Evergreens may be pruned any time of year, but pruning during the dormant season may minimize sap and resin flow from cut branches. Avoid pruning trees when you might increase susceptibility to pests or diseases.