Tree Care
A Guide for Tree Owners
**Care for Young Trees**

Like all other plants trees need light, water, food and time to grow properly. Sometimes when partially grown saplings are planted, they need support as well. If all these can be provided then few problems should arise.

The first few years of a tree’s life are when it is most susceptible to damage. If the tree has been planted in the right place, light should not be an issue. If the tree is too shaded then there is little that can be done unless it is still small enough to be replanted (see Tree Planting leaflet).

Young trees need watering until they have grown sufficient new roots to enable them to obtain enough water from the surrounding soil. This should take between one and two years. To help the tree, keep an area of soil around it free of grass or weeds. These have shallow roots and they take all the rainwater before it gets to the trees deeper roots. You can give it additional water in periods of dry weather.

Young trees which have stakes need most attention. The stake is only necessary until the tree has firmly rooted into the surrounding soil. This should take between one and two years. At the start of the growing season check to see if the tree still needs its stake. Undo the tie which holds it to the stake and give the stem a firm but gentle pull. The stem should flex but there shouldn’t be any movement at ground level. If the tree seems firm in the ground, pull the stake out and fill the hole with soil. If not, retie the tree to the stake - the tie should be tight enough to hold the tree firmly but not so tight as to constrict stem growth. Check that the tie is not too tight at least once more during the growing season, as over-tight ties can girdle trees.

**Care for Semi-Mature Trees**

A semi-mature tree is one that has been planted for a few years, well established and is just starting its phase of rapid growth to maturity.

Semi-mature trees need only a little help from us. The roots should now spread far enough and deep enough for the tree to get sufficient water and nutrient from the soil. If the tree is in a lawn it’s a good idea to leave a small circle free of turf around the stem, and apply a mulch to ensure you don’t hit the trunk with the lawnmower when cutting the grass.

This is one of the most common causes of damage to trees in gardens.

The supporting stake should have been removed and the only other attention needed might be some formative pruning to enable the tree to grow into a good shape. Prune out any weak shoots as well as any shoots which cross or rub against each other. This should be done while the tree is still quite young so the wounds heal quickly. The work can be done with secateurs. Don’t wait until the shoots are so thick that a saw is needed.
Care for Mature Trees

Trees which have reached maturity should not need much attention to keep them healthy but when they are close to houses, near roads and so on, they should be inspected regularly for defects or points that may require attention.

Inspections

It is important to ensure that any trees in your garden are in a safe condition.

What to look out for:

- Inspect your tree closely once each year – September or early October is best as the fruit-bodies (toadstools or brackets) of decay fungi are likely to be visible if the tree is infected. Look for fungal fruit-bodies on the base or stem of the tree, or on the ground near the base.
- Symptoms of ill health in the canopy will also be visible and not unduly obscured by autumn colours.
- Look for holes or decayed wood between the buttresses at the base, in the stem and in the main branches.
- Look for patches of loose or flaking bark and old pruning wounds which have not healed fully.
- Look for branches which have tight V-shaped junctions with each other, branches which have abrupt bends in them, or branches which have an abrupt change in diameter.
- Ivy is not harmful to trees (except where the growth is so excessive its volume and weight can help cause branches to break in strong winds). Ivy is beneficial as a habitat for birds and insects. It can hide defects, so it should be removed from time to time.
- Any of these symptoms indicate that the tree might have structural weakness. If you find any of them, seek advice (see last page).

In addition, check the overall appearance of the tree – do all the leaves look the same healthy colour? (For this, July and August are a good time to check). Do all the branches have leaves right at their ends or are some branches dead at the end? It is normal for some small branches inside the tree canopy to die off, but major dead branches or branches dying from the end usually indicate root problems. Discoloured, distorted or sparse leaves can indicate pest or disease problems. If you see something that doesn’t look right, seek advice.

As well as the health and structure of the tree, check that it is not causing undue problems to anyone else. If it is near a road, check that the lowest branches don’t cause any obstruction. Branches should be at least 5.2m (17ft) above the road or 2.4m (8ft) above the pavement. Check that the branches don’t obscure street lights, road signs or street names. It is also a good idea to check that they are not causing problems to your neighbours (such as blocking all the light to their windows).
Who should you get to prune your trees?

It is recommended you visit www.trees.org.uk (The Arboricultural Association) for a list of contractors. Many reputable firms also advertise in the Yellow Pages; be wary of some who advertise under more than one name (look at the contact details). A personal recommendation is the best advertisement. Never use a contractor who knocks on your door and says your tree needs pruning (but some good contractors do put flyers in letterboxes). Always get more than one quote (which should be a fixed price) and ask to see a copy of their insurance certificate.

**Crown Lifting** – is the removal of branches from the lower part of the canopy to give greater clearance from the ground. This can be done, for example, to give more headroom over a path or to let more light into ground floor windows.

**Crown Thinning** – is the removal of a proportion of the smaller branches and leaf-bearing shoots throughout the canopy. The overall size and shape of the tree is not affected but the density of the canopy is reduced. This can be done to let more light into windows or to lessen the tree’s resistance to the wind.

**Crown Reduction** – is the removal of branches over the whole tree to effect a reduction in size. If done carefully only the size is affected – the shape remains similar to its original. Crown reduction is a serious form of pruning and is carried out only if the tree’s structural condition merits it, or the tree has seriously outgrown its situation.

**Dead-wooding** – is the removal of dead branches from the canopy before they drop due to natural causes.
Crown lifting

After

Before

Crown thinning

Crown reduction
Pollarding – is the removal of the whole canopy of the tree leaving only the trunk and a few short stumps. Vigorous re-growth forms a small rounded canopy. This is the most serious form of pruning and is not really suitable for amenity trees, but can be used in the short term to retain trees in very poor structural condition. Some trees (e.g. London Plane) can be pollarded indefinitely but the process should start when they are young.

Some useful advice

DO
● inspect your tree regularly.
● seek advice about anything that looks unusual.
● seek advice about large cavities or fungal fruit bodies.

DON’T
● prune unless really necessary
● fasten anything to it that can’t be adjusted easily (such as a washing line, swings)
● put your compost heap under it.
● have bonfires or burn rubbish near it
● alter the soil level or dig trenches near it without advice.
● alter the ground surface around it without advice (e.g. paving)
● build near it without advice.

Pruning

If a tree has structural defects or is causing major problems then in most cases pruning will be enough. Only in exceptional circumstances will felling be necessary.

Pruning trees, particularly big ones, is a skilled and sometimes dangerous job. This leaflet doesn’t show you how to prune trees, but the explanations of pruning terms will give you some idea of the types of work that can alleviate problems.
Note that different species of tree will tolerate pruning to different degrees. Not many species will tolerate heavy crown reduction or pollarding. Seek advice before undertaking such work, as the tree could be badly damaged or even killed.

Research indicates that trees heal better if they are growing when pruned. Times to avoid pruning are when the leaves are unfolding and just before and during leaf-fall.

If your tree does need pruning you may need the consent of the council’s planning service before the work starts. You will need consent for any tree growing in a conservation area or covered by a Tree Preservation Order. Ask the council for advice.

**Why should we care for trees?**

Threes are attractive in their own right and provide oxygen and shade, screen unsightly buildings, filter noise and dirt, and provide a haven for wildlife. A healthy, well cared-for tree can live for a long time, and should provide pleasure for generations to come.

If not cared for, trees can cause problems or could become dangerous.

Trees help cleanse the air by intercepting airborne particles, reducing heat, and absorbing such pollutants as carbon monoxide, sulphur dioxide, and nitrogen dioxide. Trees remove this air pollution by lowering air temperature, through respiration, and by retaining particles.

Shade resulting in cooling is what a tree is best known for. Shade from trees reduces the need for air conditioning in summer. In winter, trees break the force of winter winds, lowering heating costs.

You don’t need to be an expert to look after your tree. All you need is time, the ability to observe, and this leaflet to help you. You can always get expert help later if you need it.
Sources of advice

Tree Section, Wandsworth Council
Wandsworth Common,
Dorlcote Road
London, SW18 3RT
(020) 8871 6372

Planning Service
Wandsworth Council
Town Hall,
Wandsworth High Street
London, SW18 2PU
(020) 8871 6631

The Arboricultural Association
Ullenwood Court
Ullenwood,
Cheltenham
Gloucester GL53 9QS
(01242) 522152

Arboricultural Advisory &
Information Service
Alice Holt Lodge
Wrecclesham,
Farnham
Surrey, GU10 4LH
(01420) 22022
www.treehelp.info

Tree Council
71 Newcomen Street
London SE1 1YT
(020) 7407 9992