

Leaves are now on the ground, but trees still need attention.

With the branches bare, fall and winter are actually good times to examine any tree for areas of stress and to prune most non-flowering trees.

According to Jim Skiera, executive director of the International Society of Arboriculture (ISA), potential hazards and tree problems are not always obvious to the untrained eye. Damaged tree limbs can split or break in the treetops, and branches of all sizes can come crashing down at any time, especially during high winds. That's why trees should be checked from the bottom up, preferably by an ISA Certified Arborist, to determine the full extent of any possible damage.

"Paying attention to the treetops now can prevent further damage and greater property loss later on," Skiera says. "Storm damage can put major stress on a tree, and that stress can require pruning or additional support such as cables or braces."

Trees become dormant in the winter, making pruning easier. Without leaves, it is easier to spot dead or broken branches that need to be removed to prevent breakage coming in harsh winter weather.

Deciding what and where to prune involves an understanding of basic tree biology, sharp tools and an artful eye. ISA emphasizes a few simple principles to understand before you prune:

Prune with a purpose—To remove dead or diseased wood, provide clearance or improve structure.

Use proper technique—Improper cuts can cause long-term damage.

Make small cuts—Creates less damage to the tree than large cuts

Make cuts just outside the branch collar—Allows for faster wound closure.

Do not leave stubs.

Only use sharp and clean tools.

"Proper pruning is an important part of tree health maintenance," according to Skiera. "Every tree is different. Pruning at the wrong time, pruning incorrectly, or pruning too much may create more problems than not pruning at all."