

Conservation Practice Standard Overview

Tree/Shrub Pruning (660)

Tree/shrub pruning is a treatment applied to trees and shrubs that involves the removal of selected branches, shoots, or roots. It may also be applied to the removal of all above-ground material where a coppicing technique is being used to renew the growth of trees or shrubs.

Practice Information

Pruning is used to improve the health, appearance, and value of trees or shrubs by removing damaged, unhealthy, or unsightly portions of the plants. It can also be used to address safety concerns by cutting hazardous branches, or removing fuels that contribute to wildfire risk. Pruning can encourage growth of understory plants by getting sunlight to the forest floor. It may also be used to provide access to a forested stand for other management activities.

Pruning is used on field windbreaks to manage drifting snow, spreading it more evenly over the adjacent fields to allow earlier cropping and improved moisture conditions. Windbreaks may also be pruned to manage odors or to provide air flow that reduces the likelihood of tree diseases.

Timing of pruning is a critical consideration. Many trees and shrubs are best pruned during the dormant season to avoid shock to the plant, and to reduce the likelihood of insect or disease attacks. However, pruning may be necessary following storms to remove damaged and hazardous branches.

The woody material left after pruning trees or shrubs can remain on site and contribute to soil organic matter and plant nutrient supplies. Alternately, it can be removed from the site if it presents a hazard for wildfires, or if it will contribute to outbreaks of harmful insects or plant diseases.



A variety of tree and shrub species may be pruned, but the practice is labor-intensive and can be expensive. Costs and benefits should be evaluated before deciding to prune.

Impacts to wildlife habitat are variable, depending on site conditions, tree or shrub characteristics, and the wildlife species present. Adjust the timing of pruning operations so they do not impact nesting birds or the rearing of young animals.

Common Associated Practices

Tree/Shrub Pruning (660) is applied as a facilitating practice to Alley Cropping (311), Multi-story Cropping (379), Silvopasture Establishment (381), Tree/Shrub Establishment (612), and Windbreak/ Shelterbelt Renovation (650). Woody Residue Treatment (384) is a supporting practice used for removing woody material. Forest Stand Improvement (666) is a supporting practice used when entire trees must be cut or killed to control disease or insect pests.

For further information, contact your local NRCS field office.

