Trees are like dogs and children. They are all easier to train when they are young.

We teach children and dogs rules to keep them safe. We teach them how to socialize so they are more fun to be around. We must also train trees so they become safe, healthy, and beautiful.

Trees in city settings need special care to insure that they develop into strong, well-developed trees with good branch structure. As you may recall from local news features, large trees with poor form have split and crush cars and homes.

Trees do not grow to a safe and healthy shape on their own. Yes, it is true that trees have grown for centuries without our intervention. Trees in the forest survive and thrive without human care. The difference is that trees in the woods don’t split and fall on cars or houses.

The first step in growing a healthy tree is to select a good quality tree. Fortunately, nurseries, landscapers and consumers alike now have a uniform set of standards to evaluate tree quality.

Nursery professionals, University of Florida professors and the Florida Department of Agriculture’s Division of Plant Industry staff developed a set of grades and standards. They are easy to use and yet are specific enough for our huge variety of Florida plants.

Trunk shape, branch patterns, size in comparison to the pot, root growth, insects and diseases and other factors are taken into consideration. Using a check list, trees are scored and rated as Florida Fancy, Florida number 1, Florida number 2 and cull. The best grade is Florida Fancy. Cull trees are of poor quality and should not be used in landscaping. Trees can be pruned to correct some problems and improve in grade in future years.

Counties, businesses, and landscape architects often specify "Florida number 1 or better" for tree planting projects. You may pay a little more for a tree which has been graded but you often get what you pay for.

Young trees with a trunk diameter less than 2" grow fast and require less aftercare than larger "instant trees." Younger trees are also easier to train into a good quality tree and to maintain at a high grade classification.

Trees such as oaks, maples, magnolias, sycamores and hollies should have one dominant central leader or main trunk. Don’t top a tree. Cutting the main shoot tip results in multiple upright shoots. As these co-dominant leaders grow and enlarge in diameter, they push away from each other and eventually force one or more of the branches to split from the main trunk.

If trees develop multiple co-dominant leaders, corrective pruning is needed to "change their minds". Instead of removing the extra shoots, they should be subordinated, or cut back to just above a side shoot. Since horizontal branches grow slower than upright branches, the central leader will overgrow the corrected branch or branches and regain dominance.

While trees are young, remove any dead or diseased branches and crossing branches.

Another common mistake with young trees is the removal of lower branches to produce a "clear trunk", the characteristic mature tree shape. Young trees benefit from having small twigs and branches along the trunk. Leaves produce carbohydrates for plant growth which are carried down the trunk. These plant foods are stored in trunk tissues resulting in faster growth and increased trunk diameter. Removing shoots along the trunk slows tree growth and development. In addition, small twigs on the trunk protect it from mower damage and sunburn.
Proper pruning cuts are also important to plant health. When branches are not removed properly, the wound seals slowly and decay is likely.

Diagrams on proper pruning cuts and training tips for young trees are included in Community Tree Care, a fact sheet written by Dr. Ed Gilman from the University of Florida’s Environmental Horticulture Department. Call the Osceola County Extension Office at (321) 697-3000 or stop by for a free copy.

If you are going to plant a tree, invest in quality, plant it well and train it properly for your future enjoyment.

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