

Pruning Phases

Bob Ball, Member, Missouri Chapter

I find that people confusing “pruning” with “limbing”. Many landowners have removed limbs because they were simply in the way when operating equipment around their trees, there was some storm damage resulting in the need to remove damaged limbs or possibly tree limbs were impeding the view from a favorite vantage point. There is no concern about size, timing or impact to the long-term timber value of the tree. Pruning, on the other hand, is carried out during the dormant season and it has a specific goal of producing butt logs of greater market value. Hopefully, a percentage of those logs will be deemed to be “veneer” quality. Our lofty goal is producing logs that will one day meet the criteria for veneer by whatever the market demand might be at the point in the future.

There are three phases to this type of “pruning”: corrective pruning, pole timber pruning and pruning for harvest. My terminology.

- Corrective pruning – the goal is producing a strong and straight central leader under an open canopy. This can begin when the sapling is only 3’ in height, but typically a little taller around 5’ tall. Finding the best central leader from the top whorl of branches and removing all but one or maybe two of those leaders is our primary objective. That may entail taping small branches to encourage development of a single leader while also pruning back any competing leaders. See photo attached. To me it is equally important to remove any competing canopy from nearby trees to help ensure the central leader of our black walnut can grow straight and tall without shading or pulling from vines. A few side branches may be removed as well, but the focus is the top of the tree. Tools used in this phase will be hand pruner, hand saw, tape of your preference (I prefer orange electrical tape or duct tape), and a chain drive pole pruner to work the top of trees beyond my reach from the ground.
- Pole timber pruning – again, the focus is still on the central leader working from the top of the tree down, but in this phase more effort is placed on removing lateral branches less than 2” in diameter. The smaller the better. If the branches are larger than 2”, I usually ignore them UNLESS the tree is on an ideal site with tremendous growth potential in which case I might make the effort to remove somewhat larger branches when the butt log is roughly 5” in diameter or less. I remove no more than 25% of the entire tree’s canopy in a single season to avoid a flush of epicormic branching the following spring. My focus is the larger limbs, but my first attention is given to the very top of the tree then working down. Primary tool is the pole saw with chain drive pruning shears.
- Pruning for harvest – this phase usually kicks in when the tree is about 25’ tall and maybe 6” in diameter. My personal target veneer log length is 21’ (12’ + 8’) with 6” of trim on each log. During this phase of pruning I am focusing on making sure I’ve not missed a small limb somewhere or epicormic branches haven’t appeared that were missed previously. The central leader and crown of the tree is set so my focus is ensuring this butt log now only needs to finish growing. For this phase I use a 25’ pole saw only and spend a very minimal amount of time with each tree. Once this last visit has been made, there is no need to go back. Pruning is done, but the elapsed time period can be 12-15 years!

* * *