

Black Walnut Pruning Guide

Proper pruning of young black walnut trees can potentially increase log value 10 to 20 - fold. The objective is to develop a straight, single-stemmed tree with a solid trunk free of side branches up to 10 to 24 feet, depending on site suitability for walnut. Complete the pruning by time the stem is no more than 3 to 5 inches in diameter.

General

1. Prune during the dormant season (late November to early March) with January and February being the best timing.
2. Use good quality and sharp clippers, pruning saws, and telescopic pole pruners with the cutting blade and saw blade combination.
3. After confirming the lower stem on young trees is healthy and undamaged, make pruning decisions starting at the top and work down.
4. Assist the central leader by assuring its tip or apical bud is taller or higher than any other leaders or branches that are competing for dominance. Totally remove or at least tip-prune any competitive leaders.
5. Then look for the largest branches and remove no more than 1/3 of the leaf area per season.
6. Do not prune flat to the stem. Instead, make an angled cut just outside of the branch collar so that the wound is about the same diameter as the branch. Do not leave stubs.

Seedlings (< 1 inch in diameter)

1. Resist unnecessary pruning the first couple years.
2. Prune only to develop a single straight central leader.

Saplings (1-3 inches in diameter at breast height, DBH)

1. Prune to maintain the single straight central leader.
2. If a fork exists, save the shoot that is most vertical. Assuming they are nearly identical, save the one that has a strong lateral branch underneath which will influence the remaining single leader to straighten up. One-year old leaders will straighten up considerably but two- or three-year old wood is too rigid to straighten very much. A splint can be taped to support and straighten a crooked leader, but this is time consuming.
3. If a tree is hopelessly crooked, coppice or cut off near ground level and start over. The root collar and strong root system will produce multiple sprouts the following season. After a couple of years, select the straightest and most erect sprout. Gradually eliminate the others.

Pole-Size Trees (3-6 inches DBH)

1. Continue pruning with the same techniques as indicated above. If a tree has never been pruned, prune so it has a single stem and remove the largest branches but limit pruning to no more than 1/3 of the leaf area. To prevent tearing the bark down the tree, make an initial cut about a foot from the stem and then cut the stub off at the branch collar.
2. If the tree is hopelessly crooked, coppice and start over.
3. If planted or volunteer walnut trees are densely populated, start selecting which ones are the best, and spend time on only those that are 25 to 35 feet apart so there is ample space for crown development.