HOW TO MAIM OR KILL A TREE IN SOUTHWEST FLORIDA

Ralph E. Mitchell, Director/Horticulture Agent - Charlotte County UF/IFAS Extension Service

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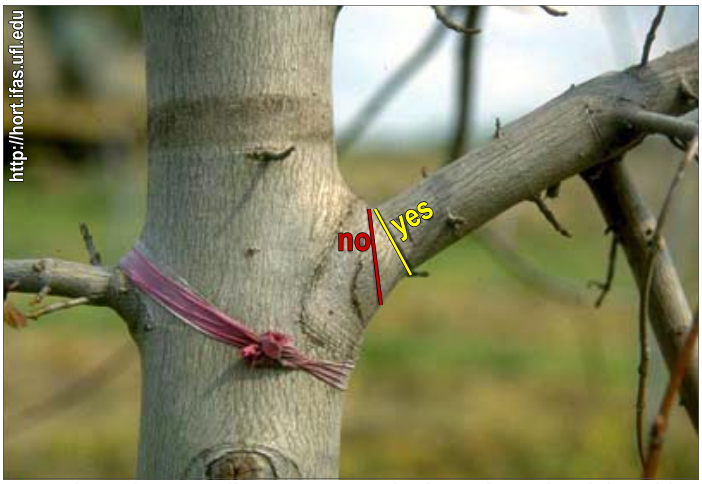
I once saw a presentation at a Horticultural Conference called “100 Ways to Kill a Tree”. I was fascinated by the number of ways you can kill a tree, sometimes without even really trying! In order to help you NOT kill your tree, let’s look at some of the ways that people kill their trees.

One of the first ways to kill a tree is to plant it in the wrong place. At the Extension Service, we never get tired of saying “Right Plant, Right Place!” It is crucial that the place you plant a tree is sufficient to support its sustainable growth over a long period of time. How big will it get and what is the available growing space? I saw a live oak which could potentially grow 50 feet tall and 100 feet wide installed in a very small planting bed barely 15x15 feet in size; marooned in a parking lot. Not only was the planting area space glaringly inappropriate, but the space for the roots, which could eventually grow three times the reach of the branches, was severely limited.



Cut along the "yes" line to remove the branch on the right. This cuts just outside the branch collar. Cutting through the "no" line cuts through the collar and removes the branch protection zone.

Removing the branch appropriately leaves the collar intact.

You can kill a tree by allowing construction activities too close to the tree. Trees that may appear to be well protected can still be damaged because the roots go so far out beyond the drip line. Construction site work and even repeated foot traffic around urban trees can damage roots and kill the tree. Trees that appear fine today may show signs of decline and death in subsequent years.

The simple process of planting a tree can also result in its death. Trees are often planted too deep resulting in a slow decline and eventual demise. Make sure that you can see the root flare (where the trunk and roots meet) just above the soil level. Also, set the root ball so that is

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The cut in the center of the photo removed the collar and the branch bark ridge. This is referred to as a flush cut. The cut on the bottom was appropriate and left the collar and branch bark ridge intact.

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about 10% above the soil level. In the same vein, make sure that you do not mulch too close to the trunk. Keep mulch away from the trunk in a donut-like pattern about two to three inches deep. Mulch also provides a visual clue that helps keep lawnmowers and weed-whackers away for the trunk. Wounds from mechanical injury don't seal up well and can provide entries for pests. Mechanical injury can also result from tags and staking efforts left on too long. Also make sure that all synthetic burlap and twine has been removed at the time of planting as girdling can occur.

For more information about our Florida Yards and Neighborhoods Program, please contact our FYN Horticulture Program Assistant, Allison Turner, at 764.4351 or email Allison.Turner@CharlotteFL.com. Allison can help educate you about the FYN Program so you can create a beautiful, Florida-Friendly landscape that saves you time and money while conserving precious water resources and reducing pollution.

contact a
MASTER GARDENER
on the Plant Lifeline from 1:00pm-4:00pm Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at 764.4340 or by email Master.Gardener@charlottefl.com.

You can also visit them at one of our many Plant Clinics around the county:
http://charlotte.ifas.ufl.edu/PlantClinics.pdf

Improper pruning tops off the list of ways to kill a tree. Pruning just outside the branch collar region, not a flush cut, is the best practice. This branch collar region contains properties that help with wound sealing. Flush cuts never seal up properly and eventually wind up being a good place for decay. Topping trees is not a proper arboriculture practice and is in fact a violation of the County tree ordinance. This improper pruning practice forces shoots to proliferate at the topped stubs. Besides poor structural connections that can be easily broken in a wind storm, this excessive sprouting eventually grows to the point where the individual sprouts push up against each other. The open wound of the topped branch never seals up properly which promotes decay.

While there may be many ways to kill or maim a tree, common sense and some basic knowledge will help prevent this mishap.

Resources:

- Gilman, E.F. (1999) Where Are Tree Roots? UF/IFAS Extension Service.

Ralph Mitchell is the Extension Director/Horticulture Agent for Charlotte County UF/IFAS Extension Service. Ralph can be reached at 941.764.4344 or by email: Ralph.Mitchell@CharlotteFL.com.

UF UNIVERSITY of FLORIDA
IFAS Extension
Charlotte County

RALPH MITCHELL
Extension Director/Horticulture Agent
Ralph.Mitchell@CharlotteFL.com

CHARLOTTE COUNTY UF/IFAS EXTENSION SERVICE
25550 Harbor View Road, Suite 3 - Port Charlotte, Florida 33980
941.764.4340 - 941.764.4343 (fax) - http://charlotte.ifas.ufl.edu