



# Caring for Mature Trees in Orkney



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WOODLAND  
PROJECTS

## Introduction

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Trees in Orkney are relatively scarce and therefore much appreciated. We need to treat them with care, so that we can live happily alongside them, especially in our towns and built-up areas.

However, there are some situations where trees can cause problems and work is unavoidable. This leaflet, therefore, gives some guidance on the best and most effective pruning methods to ensure that your trees stay healthy and attractive.

Remember that trees in Orkney are only in full leaf for four or five months of the year, so it is their bare, winter form which we see for most of the time. Any poor quality work will, therefore, be very evident!

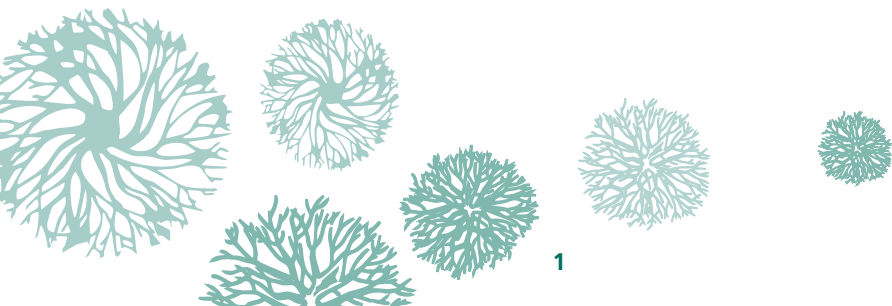
## Legal protection of trees in Orkney

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Orkney has four 'urban' conservation areas (Kirkwall, Stromness, St Margaret's Hope and Balfour village), in which all the trees are legally protected. Tree Preservation Orders also exist on most of the mature trees in Finstown. For all these protected trees, you must get prior permission from Orkney Islands Council before carrying out any works.

The Orkney Islands Council planning policy says that work will only be permitted in "*exceptional circumstances of public safety ... or where the tree in question detracts from, rather than enhances the urban landscape.*"

You can be fined up £20,000 for any unauthorised works or damage to these trees (including any on your own property), so please always check first. If the retention of the tree was a condition of planning permission for an adjacent development, you might also need to check if this is still binding.



## **Should I prune my tree?**

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A tree should only be pruned if there is very good reason to do so. Every pruning cut is a wound to the tree and therefore a potential source of rot and disease. The majority of trees certainly do not need to be pruned to continue to grow in a healthy manner.

The following questions might help you decide whether work is really necessary:

- **Where is the tree located?**

A large old tree, with a decaying trunk and several dead branches, which lies in a remote location, is not likely to be posing any threat or causing any problems. It can be left standing to provide a home for insects and birds. By contrast, the same tree in a busy street would be unsafe and require speedy attention.

- **Is the tree dangerous to passers by?**

Sometimes it is clear that a tree is becoming dangerous - there may be obvious decay or hanging branches. Other, more hidden, dangers might involve less obvious rot and you may need a skilled arboriculturalist to investigate the extent of the problem and give advice.

- **Is the tree causing structural problems?**

Very occasionally, the roots of a large tree may begin to cause structural problems to a building or wall. The remedy needs to be carefully considered, since killing the tree may result in the rotting of the roots in question and thus subsequent further movement of the structure. Again, take advice.

- **Is the tree causing other problems?**

Other problems which might be a reason for careful pruning include :

- overhanging branches affecting traffic or passing pedestrians
- severe shading to your house or garden
- blocking a fine view

The fact that a tree drops leaves, or is a home to nesting rooks, is not a good reason to prune it. Leaves can be easily swept up and composted and rooks only nest for a short time each year.

## How should my tree be pruned?

Trees in their natural form have a hierarchy of branches - decreasing in size from the main trunk, through the major branches, the smaller branches and finally the smallest twigs. Each part of the tree is therefore structurally able to support the next smaller part. The overall aim of pruning should be to retain this framework and its logical, strong, safe structure. This above-ground framework is, of course, balanced by an extensive underground root system, which also needs to be protected from damage if the tree is to stay healthy. Accepted pruning methods include the following:

### • Crown cleaning

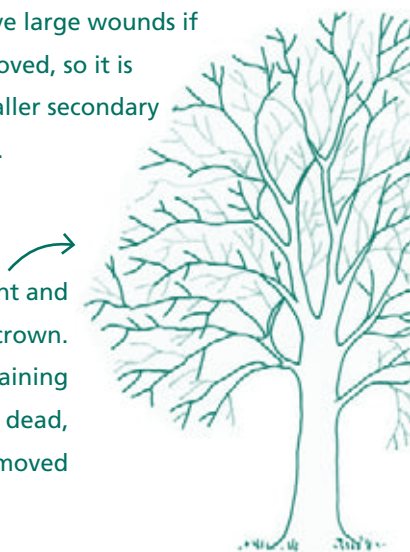
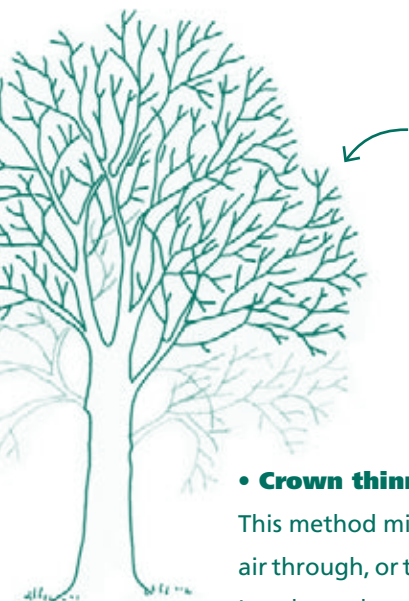
This is the gentlest form of pruning and involves only the removal of dead, dying, diseased, or weakly attached branches, from the crown of a tree. One of our commonest trees, the sycamore, often has various amounts of deadwood in its crown and this is not necessarily something which requires action.

### • Crown lifting

This method might be used where the lower branches of a tree are obstructing traffic or pedestrians. It consists of removing the offending lower branches to give more clearance beneath the tree. This method can leave large wounds if large lower limbs are removed, so it is better to remove only smaller secondary branches if this is possible.

### • Crown thinning

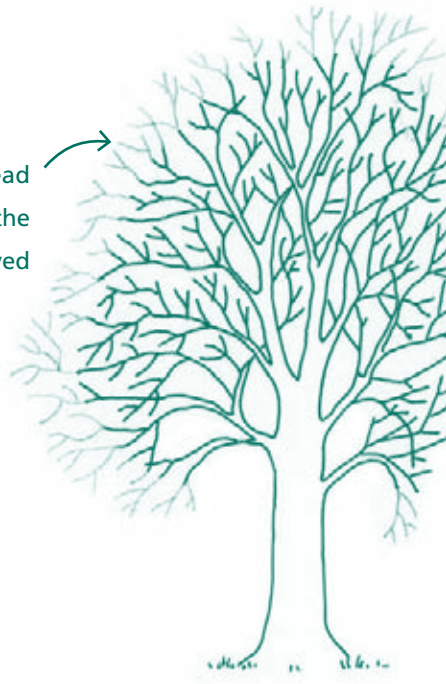
This method might be used to let more light and air through, or to reduce the weight of the crown. It reduces the volume of the tree whilst retaining its overall size and shape. Small, secondary, dead, crossing, or very close branches can be removed to thin the whole of the crown evenly.



- **Crown reduction**

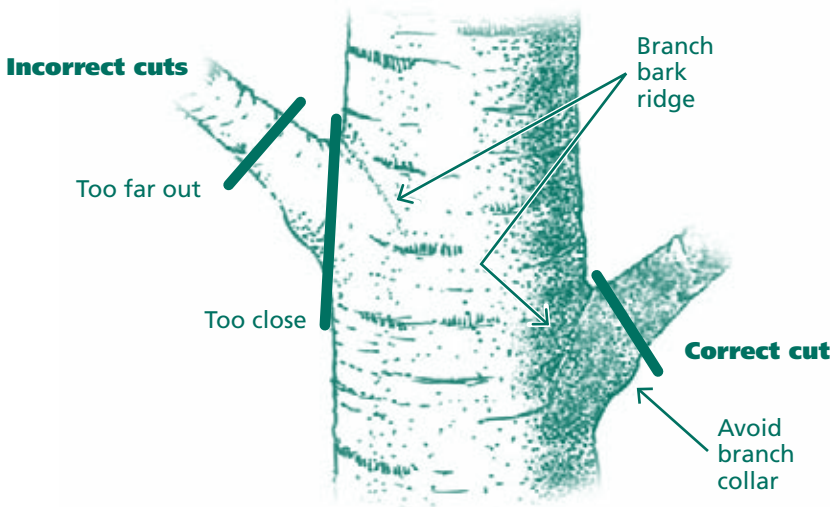
This method is used to reduce the height and spread of a tree, perhaps because it is outgrowing the available space. The ends of branches are removed whilst keeping its natural shape.

The above are all methods which require a high level of skill and experience to be carried out correctly. You should not attempt to do them yourself unless you are fully trained.



- **Correct method of making cuts**

The position of each pruning cut is really important. Avoid 'flush cuts' and instead use what is called 'natural target pruning'. Heavy branches should be removed in sections.



Make sure all tools are sharp so that cuts are clean and don't leave unnecessary and unsightly stubs. Current advice is to leave the cut surface as it is, rather than to paint it with any product, as was often done in the past.

## When should the work be done?

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The best time to prune trees is much debated. Clearly it is easier for a tree surgeon to see the structure of the tree and carry out the work when the tree is leafless. Pruning in winter also avoids disturbing nesting birds, so has many advantages.

Pruning can also be carried out in mid to late summer, when the tree is in full leaf and thus making growth and storing nutrients. At this time, it is able to overcome surgery, to seal off cuts and generally withstand the shock. Remember that many birds are protected under wildlife legislation, so please avoid carrying out work in the spring nesting season, which is also not a good time for the tree to be pruned.

## What not to do!

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'Lopping' of trees is not only bad for the tree, but is also unlikely to achieve your intended aim. When a branch is lopped, new dense growth will sprout from the vicinity of the cut (therefore producing more shade, not less). This whole area of the cuts is also very prone to rot and you can be left with further longterm problems. A lopped tree is not a pretty sight and is never a good solution. It will not be recommended to you by any knowledgeable contractor, so beware anyone who suggests it!

'Pollarding' is even more severe and involves the removal of all branches back to the trunk. In Orkney, most trees treated in this manner will either die, or never recover an attractive, healthy shape.

If the tree is really causing you very severe problems, it may be better to fell it completely, rather than disfigure it by such inappropriate methods.



*Would you want to own this tree?*

## **Keeping safe**

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Please never attempt to use a chainsaw yourself unless you are well trained in its use and are wearing appropriate safety gear.

Never attempt to climb trees to undertake work yourself.

Avoid contact with, or damage to, overhead powerlines during any work.

## **Who can do this work?**

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Tree surgery and felling should only be done by someone well qualified and experienced. Your contractor clearly needs to know how to use a chainsaw, but equally importantly, they need to be skilled in the correct and safe way to prune a tree. Unskilled work may leave you with a legacy of problems.

If you have any doubts about your contractor's ability to do the work, you could ask the following questions :

- What qualifications do you have to do this work?
- Do you work to a British Standard?  
(They should be in possession of a relevant certificate for tree work and operate to BS 3998: Recommendations for Tree Work.)
- Are you insured?
- Can you provide a written quotation with a detailed specification of the work proposed?
- Can you provide references for similar work?

## **Avoiding problems in the first place**

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Choosing to plant the right tree in the space you have available is important. The Orkney Woodland Project can advise you on good species choice for your land, so that hopefully you and your trees can live happily together well into the future.

# **Enjoy your trees!**



cover illustrations Anne Bignall

### Further Reference

BS 3998: *Recommendations for Tree Work*

Orkney Woodland Project leaflet : *Protection of Trees on Development Sites*  
*Town and Country Planning (Scotland) Act*

### Contacts for Further Information

**Orkney Islands Council Environment Officer or Development Management**

(for permission to carry out work to a protected tree) Tel: 01856 873535

**Jenny Taylor, Orkney Woodland Project** for general information about trees and woodland management. Tel: 01856 851322, e-mail [jenny@jtlarch.co.uk](mailto:jenny@jtlarch.co.uk)



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