Backyard Tree Guide

Seasonal Tree Care Checklist

A printable yard list for Greater Cincinnati and southwest Ohio homes · Updated November 2026

Most backyard shade trees want a routine prune in **late winter, while they are still dormant**. In Ohio that window is often **February into early March** — after the worst deep-freeze nights and before buds swell. Use the tree, not just the calendar: if it is still fully dormant and you can work safely from the ground, you are in the window. Dead, damaged, or hanging wood is a safety job first; it does not have to wait for the "perfect" month.

Winter

December – early March · the main pruning season

- ☐ Walk the yard from the ground after leaves drop. Look for broken or hanging wood, a new lean, or soil lifting around the roots.
- ☐ If you are unsure whether a tree is dead or just dormant, use the scratch, bud, and snap tests described on page 2 — and in our **dead-or-dormant guide**.
- ☐ For a routine shape-up on a shade tree, wait until it is fully dormant, often February into early March here, and before it leafs out.
- ☐ Maples, birches, grapes, and some walnuts can drip sap if you prune late in the dormant season. It looks dramatic and is usually not dangerous. Do not paint the wound.
- ☐ Pull mulch back so you can see where the trunk meets the roots. A "mulch volcano" can slowly girdle a tree.

Spring

March – May · leaf-out, blooms, and oak wilt season

- ☐ After similar trees in the neighborhood have leafed out, re-check anything that still has no leaves. A red oak can be later than a maple; give it a reasonable window.
- ☐ Spring-blooming ornamentals (lilac, forsythia, some magnolias, many flowering fruit trees): prune just after they finish blooming, or you may cut off next year's flower buds.
- ☐ In much of the Midwest, avoid pruning oaks in spring and early summer, when beetles that can carry oak wilt are more active. If you have a valuable oak and you are not sure, ask a certified arborist or local extension.
- ☐ Do not "top" a tree, and do not take more than about a quarter of the live canopy in a year on a mature tree.
- ☐ Light cleanup of obviously dead wood is fine. Save a big structural prune for the next dormant season unless the wood is a hazard.

Summer

June – August · hazards only, not a styling prune

- ☐ Do not start a "make it look pretty" prune in midsummer heat. You cannot see structure as well through a full canopy.
- ☐ Hazard work is still year-round: a hanger, a limb on a roof, or wood over a walk does not wait until February. See **DIY vs. hire**.
- ☐ If a tree drops leaves in a drought, do not assume it is dead. Scratch-test first, and wait for the next growing season if the twigs are still green and the tree is not a hazard.
- ☐ If you make a larger cut you can safely reach from the ground, use the three-cut method so the bark does not strip down the trunk. Details are in **How to Use a Pole Saw Safely**.
- ☐ When you are done cutting, check chain tension, bar oil, and put the tools away sharp and dry.

Fall

September – November · cleanup, not a heavy prune

- ☐ Fall is usually not the best time for a heavy prune. A hard cut in autumn can push late growth that does not harden off before a freeze, and some diseases move more easily in cool, wet weather.
- ☐ Light cleanup of obviously dead wood is fine. After a fall storm, treat it as cleanup, not a styling session. See **What to Do After a Storm**.
- ☐ After the first big wind, walk the yard from a doorway first. Tape off hangers over walks and drives. If anything is on a power line, stay back and call the utility.
- ☐ Photograph damage before you start cleaning if you may need those pictures later.
- ☐ Be wary of a door-knock crew the morning after a storm that wants a large cash deposit and cannot show insurance.

Is it dead, dying, or just dormant?

- ☐ **Bud check.** Plump buds with normal scales are a good sign. Dry, shriveled buds on every twig are a bad one.
- ☐ **Scratch test.** On a pencil-thick twig, scratch a little outer bark. Green and slightly moist usually means live tissue. Brown, dry, and brittle usually means that twig is dead. Check more than one place — a tree can have a dead side and a live side.
- ☐ **Snap test.** Live small twigs usually bend; dead ones snap dry.

Do not condemn a whole tree from one bare branch in February, and do not climb it to "check the top." Binoculars from the ground are enough for a first look. Full walkthrough: backyardtreeguide.com/how-to-tell-if-a-tree-is-dead/

Safety rules that are not optional

- ☐ Keep your feet on the ground. Never use a pole saw from a ladder, a roof, a chair, or up in the tree.
- ☐ Never work near a power line or the service drop to the house. If a limb is already on a line, call the utility. Do not touch it.
- ☐ Never cut with the bar over your face, and never stand where you expect the branch to land. Work slightly to the side of the fall line.
- ☐ Eye protection is the minimum. A helmet is smart. Two hands on the saw, boots on, no loose sleeves.
- ☐ Do not use a pole saw on a hanger unless you truly understand how that piece is held and where it will release. Many hangers are a pro job.

Stop and call a pro when any of this is true

- ☐ Anything near a power line — this is a stop, not a "be careful."
- ☐ You would need a ladder, spikes, or a rope to reach the cut. Homeowners get hurt combining ladders and saws.
- ☐ A hanging or storm-damaged limb is still attached, especially over a walk or driveway.
- ☐ The branch or tree could hit the house, garage, or a neighbor's property if the drop goes badly.
- ☐ The tree is leaning toward a target, the root plate has heaved, or the trunk is cracked or hollow and you are thinking about removal.
- ☐ You cannot see a clear, open fall path, or you do not have a place for the wood.

If you hire, ask for proof of liability insurance (and workers' comp if they have employees), and get the scope in writing. More on backyardtreeguide.com/diy-vs-hire-tree-work/

Guides that go with this checklist

1. **When to Prune Trees** backyardtreeguide.com/when-to-prune-trees/
2. **How to Tell if a Tree Is Dead, Dying, or Just Dormant** backyardtreeguide.com/how-to-tell-if-a-tree-is-dead/
3. **Should You Cut That Branch Yourself?** backyardtreeguide.com/diy-vs-hire-tree-work/
4. **How to Use a Pole Saw Safely** backyardtreeguide.com/how-to-use-a-pole-saw-safely/
5. **What to Do After a Storm** backyardtreeguide.com/after-a-storm-fallen-limbs/
6. **Best Cordless Pole Saws for Homeowners** backyardtreeguide.com/best-cordless-pole-saws/

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