

## A Landscape Is More Than Grass!

Summer is a time when we naturally turn to the outdoors to enjoy nature. It's also a time when, as homeowners, we become more involved with outdoor projects like gardening and landscaping. While hunched over the annuals or pushing the mower, it is easy to overlook the trees in the yard. The most common misconceptions are that trees take care of themselves. The truth is that yards across America are removed from their natural forest environments. Growing is an unnatural setting, they could use our help to survive and flourish. The Natural Arborist Association identifies the following key practices for optimal tree health.

**Fertilization:** Simply because you fertilized your yard does not mean that you fertilized your trees. When trees require extra nutrition, they should be fertilized in specified ways to assure they receive the maximum benefits from the treatment. Over-fertilization can create tree health problems, so the need for fertilization should be determined by measuring annual growth, checking visual systems and chemically analyzing the soil or tree leaves. Timing of fertilization is important in some cases to avoid a late flush of growth before winter.

**Watering:** Once established, trees generally don't need regular watering. However, they may need extra water in long dry spells. Newly planted trees should receive regular watering for the first few years. Be careful – too much water can be just as harmful as not enough!

**Pruning:** Trees are pruned for various reasons, but proper pruning is a tree health treatment in most cases. Removing dead or dying branches discourages the spread of decay or insect infestations, removes safety hazards, and improves the tree's appearance. Proper pruning can also help prevent storm damage. By contrast, topping and lion's tailing, while sometimes touted as ways to "make trees safe," actually cause severe and permanent damage to the tree.

**Mulching:** A 2 to 4 inch mulch layer over the tree's root system has many benefits. It protects the base of the tree from mower damage and reduces competition with turf or weeds. Mulch tends to stabilize soil temperatures and increase the soil's water-holding capacity, which can reduce the need for aeration and fertilization. In short, mulch emulates the tree's natural habitat. Mulch can be applied almost any time of the year, but avoid times when the ground is frozen. Get rid of weeds and turf before you apply the mulch, and make sure it doesn't touch the trunk of the tree; otherwise it creates a favorable environment for harmful insects and disease. Avoid over-mulching because excessive mulch can smother the tree's root system.

**Check your trees:** You may be able to carry out most tree maintenance yourself, especially for small trees, but it is best to have a professional arborist evaluate their needs first. Remember, a tree is a living thing, and its health and stability change over time.

