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Tree pruning with a purpose

Pia Finnigan, of the Arboricultural Association of Western Australia – Arbwest – explains some of the science of reducing tree canopies and foliage.

As the heat of summer fades and autumn arrives, residents often start to notice their trees. Attention turns to which trees look healthy and which appear messy, stressed or inconvenient. The instinct is often immediate: prune it, tidy it, fix it.

But according to professional arborists, that instinct can be a problem. Pruning isn't cosmetic maintenance.

It's a long-term biological decision, one that can either protect a tree for decades or begin its decline. Poorly

planned pruning removes live tissue a tree needs to photosynthesise, regulate temperature and manage water stress, especially in Western Australia's sandy soils and intense summer heat. What may look like improvement can compromise the tree's health.

The modern arboricultural approach is simple: every cut must have a purpose.

Sustainability

In arboriculture, sustainability is often misunderstood as planting more trees.

In reality, it starts with keeping the ones we already have.

Sustainability means not passing today's losses onto future generations. Tree retention ensures future communities inherit healthy urban forests. Mature trees provide immediate environmental, social and economic benefits, including shade, cooling and wildlife habitat – benefits newly planted trees may take decades to replace.

For arborists, sustainability influences daily decisions: whether to prune, how

much to remove, how to manage risk, and whether removal is truly necessary.

Not all pruning is good

Experienced arborists don't start with a chainsaw. They start by asking: 'Why are we pruning this tree?'

Pruning objectives include:

- Reducing risk;
- improving structure
- guiding future growth; and
- providing clearance from buildings and roads.

Without a defined objective, pruning often removes excessive live crown and places a tree under unnecessary stress. Trees depend on their canopy. Remove too much and the tree loses its ability to regulate temperature and water movement – critical functions in the WA climate.

The sustainability shift on the job site

For tree climber and arborist Michael Byrne of CPD Tree Services, sustainability isn't a policy document, it's a daily decision-making process.

"We avoid unnecessary pruning and look for alternatives to removal," he said.

Inspection comes before any dismantling.

"We inspect potential sites for fauna, usually by climbing or drone. If a section can't be inspected thoroughly, we lower it to the ground by rope to minimise injury to animals that might be inside," he said.

Habitat protection has become a significant part of modern arboriculture.

Tree hollows, often viewed as defects, are wildlife homes.

"We try to leave as many hollows as possible after careful assessment," Michael explained.

Even when a tree must be removed, the work doesn't necessarily end with a stump and a chipper.

"Timber can be milled into value-added timber products. Firewood can be retained or delivered to suitable locations, and mulch can be reused or sold," said Michael. "Sometimes logs can be left as habitat if the client is agreeable, however this isn't always in keeping with the land-use or fire-prevention strategy."

Western Australian arborists must also consider quarantine restrictions when moving timber due to polyphagous shot-hole borer (PSHB). In other words, sustainability in arboriculture is sometimes less about not cutting and more about what happens after the cut.

Every cut has consequences

One of the most common causes of premature decline in urban trees is over-pruning.

Damaging practices include:

- Topping;
- excessive thinning; and
- stripping inner canopy growth.

These practices often weaken trees, increase failure risk and shorten the lifespan of a tree. Modern arborists instead use recognised methods like deadwood removal, selective crown reduction, and structural pruning, reflecting the shift from aesthetics to biology.



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Proper pruning is applied plant science. Decisions depend on species, health, growth stage, root disturbance, and pest pressures. Some Western Australian natives, particularly mature specimens, don't tolerate heavy pruning, so summer is often used for assessment rather than action – observing how a tree handles heat stress helps determine what work, if any, should occur later.

Trees as infrastructure

Arborists are more often describing trees not as landscaping, but as infrastructure.

Large, established trees cool suburbs, improve liveability and support biodiversity. Removing them cannot be offset quickly by planting replacements; young trees can't provide the same environmental services for many years.

Pruning with purpose protects both public safety and canopy longevity. It removes dead or weak branches, improves structure and airflow, and encourages healthy growth while preserving canopy function. Improved airflow also helps reduce pest and disease.

A changing profession

Arboriculture has evolved from reactive tree cutting to preventative management. The goal is no longer simply removing hazards, but managing trees so hazards don't develop.

Sometimes sustainability means:

- Leaving habitat;
- reusing timber;
- delaying work; and
- doing less work, or choosing not to prune at all.

In a challenging climate, every cut influences the future urban forest.

Pruning with intent – guided by science, safety and ecological awareness – ensures Western Australia's canopy survives not just the next summer, but the next generation. **AA**