



Lael's Moon Garden Nursery

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Pruning Japanese Weeping Laceleaf Maples

Almost all of the growth that comes out of a weeping Japanese maple arches toward the ground. This characteristic is what gives them their mounded “haystack” look. Newly planted laceleafs usually don’t need much (if any) pruning. After several years however, the weeping branches form dense layers on the plant and the inner branches die due to lack of light. This dense branching obscures your view of the beautifully contorted trunk and branches in winter. Thinning out the tree in the winter before it pushes new leaves will contribute to its year around beauty. This can be done any time after the tree loses its leaves in fall and before the buds start to swell in spring.

First, there’s no cure for dead so remove the dead inner branches. Their light gray color and lack of bright healthy buds easily identifies them. A gentle pressure at their base snaps them right off. Second, remove any live branches that are growing toward the center of the tree. These will not receive enough light and they will be next year’s dead branches.

After these steps, an older tree will still have two or three dense layers of live branches and you have some choices to make. If you want the tree to get *wider*, remove the *inner* live branches. If you want to control the width of the tree, say to avoid encroaching on a sidewalk, remove the *outer* layer of branches so the width is reduced and the inner layer gets more light. Larger branches that cross each other should also be removed to give a more pleasing shape. It’s almost impossible to remove *all of* the crossing branches because there are so many, but the idea is to let light in to all remaining branches. When you’re done the tree should look like an open umbrella—hollow in the center with branches weeping down all around.

If you want to increase the height of your weeping maple, select a long limber branch near the existing top and *very gently* stake the flexible tip of it up using soft tape or yarn to avoid cutting the bark. (Don’t force it, even live limbs are fairly brittle.) The staked limb will stiffen in a couple of years and branches will begin to weep down from the higher new “trunk.” This procedure should be done in the winter—actively growing limbs are very brittle.

If this explanation seems unclear, visit our display garden after deciduous plants go dormant to see what the pruned tree should look like. Our weeping maples are planted on mounds with decorative rockwork under them, so we also shorten the branches to expose the rocks.