Good pruning is both an art and a science. It combines artistic expression and research-based data to make proper pruning decisions. The results are safe, healthy and beautiful trees. You might say, "But I'm not an artist! And I'm definitely not a scientist! Can I still get good results from my pruning?" The answer is "Yes!" And I'll show you why.

A design precept states that form follows function. In simple terms it means that the way something looks often results from the way something works. If we understand how something functions, we can better understand its form. Beautiful plants in nature have a shape or form that compliments their natural growth habit and their proper function in the landscape. When trees are structurally sound with the help of good pruning practices, they also look their best...naturally! If we get the science right when we're pruning, the art will take care of itself.

You might say that sounds great. But how do you I get the science right? Well, let's talk about it.

First, getting the science right means pruning to compliment a tree's natural growth habit. For example, mesquite trees have a weeping growth habit with lateral branches that grow downward, often to the ground. These branches are important for many reasons, one of which is to stabilize the trees during windstorms. Based on this information, if we leave more of these branches on the tree, it compliments the tree's natural function and the result is a stronger, more beautiful form. By accommodating nature instead of fighting against it, the tree withstands the next monsoon and lives to tell the story. Remember, genes always win. If we work with them, not against them, we take the first step in getting the science right.

Second, getting the science right means knowing proper pruning principles and techniques. There are a number of ways to acquire good pruning skills. One is by trial and error. From my experience, this process of learning involves a lot of trials and a lot of errors! Another option for learning about pruning is to take a class on pruning through your local garden club, extension office, trade association or college. Look for a program that emphasizes hands-on training under the supervision of a qualified arborist or landscape professional. These are time-tested ways to gain understanding of trees and how to prune them. Whatever the source, this distilled wisdom of experts who have been there and done that is better than winging it on your own.

Other resources to improve your pruning skills are the great books on pruning available today. These books can help fill in the gaps where you still lack some understanding. A good starting place is the ANSI A300 Pruning Standard. This industry benchmark is a must-read. This short guideline for proper pruning is easy to understand and puts the cookies on the bottom shelf! Get it, read it and then read the ISA's Best Management Practices publication entitled Tree Pruning. This small companion to the A300 is a practical guide to help you implement the A300 standards. A more in-depth manual on tree pruning is Ed Gilman's An Illustrated Guide to Pruning 2nd edition. This book will help take you to the next level.

Speaking of the next level, here's some tips to help you improve your pruning. Remember, get the science right and the art takes care of itself.
1. Don't prune so much interior foliage. After removing deadwood and structural problems inside the canopy, leave the remaining interior branches. These small branches, including watersprouts, feed their host stems at their point of attachment. This
helps develop branch taper necessary to support increasing end weight as the tree matures. Also, if crown reduction cuts are needed in the future, these secondary and tertiary branches are extremely valuable. You’ve probably seen those over-thinned trees with excessive end weight on all the branches. They need crown reduction but there’s no interior foliage left to cut back to. Yikes!

2. Concentrate pruning in the often-neglected outer third of the tree’s crown. Excessive end weight is responsible for damage to many trees that have never been properly pruned in the outer portion of the canopy. Aim for an even distribution of foliage throughout the crown.

3. Remove or reduce co-dominant stems. Stems that challenge the main trunk or leader for dominance in the canopy should be removed or reduced in size. If the challenging stem is quite large, it may be better to reduce it instead of remove it. This process of subordination avoids a large wound that may heal slowly and allow decay to migrate into the main stem.

4. Practice your new pruning skills on shrubs or cut branches. Before trying your new skills on a tree, practice on a shrub or cut tree branch stuck in a container of gravel. If you make a mistake or two, these miniature "trees" are pretty forgiving.

As you gain a better understanding of your trees and their unique qualities, you’ll find pruning is less a mystery and more a ministry! If knowledge is power, that power is pruning with confidence. So do some reading, take a class and then have some fun with your trees. Happy pruning!