

Saddle Fit Q&A

*By Jochen Schleese, Certified Master Saddler,
Equine and Saddle Ergonomist.*

Question:

My saddle fitter claims that most wooden trees can be adjusted. Apparently there are wooden trees designed specifically to be adjusted. Yet you state that wooden trees are not really adjustable, and that any adjustability comes only from the ability to change the flocking. How adjustable are wooden spring trees really?

ANSWER:

Wooden trees are generally sold in three widths – narrow, medium, or wide – and that's about it. If they are truly adjustable they should be able to be made to fit any horse. A traditional wooden English 'spring' tree is made of several layers of laminated wood (usually beech) glued together after being softened and shaped. Then about 16 holes are drilled into the pommel area to rivet on the gullet plate. It is about 1/8" thick and not very strong. Usually a head plate (also about 1/8" thick) is riveted to the top of the tree as counterpoint to the gullet plate underneath – but these rivets are all stress areas and not really meant to be moved.

To adjust a tree properly over the wither area (in both angle and width) it would necessitate bending this area. The wood can be bent maybe 1/2" between these two metal frames before it will break. This is the result where you try to make the tree more narrow; if you want to widen the tree at this area you will risk breaking off the tree points completely (not what can really be considered adjustable!)



The adjustability depends in large part not only on the material of the tree itself, but also on the gullet plate used. For example, Passier trees are made using a different type of gullet plate which is attached using 8 rivets – none of which are in the 'head' area. Their trees are made of bamboo and leather. There used to be a system available on the market by a company called Wellep, whereby the tree could be adjusted by the rider using an Allen key, however, it also had inherent weaknesses and was not able to handle changes in width required, only tree angle.

A truly adjustable tree should be able to be adjusted on-site using a 'tree machine' in both width (up to 10 cm) and angle – which should always match the shoulder angle of the horse for optimum fit. True adjustability means not only re-flocking the panels as

necessary but also being able to adjust the tree over the withers to ensure that there is enough freedom of movement all around the wither area to accommodate the horse in motion.

Jochen is the author of *The Silent Killer* (2012) and *Suffering in Silence: The Saddle Fit Link to Physical and Psychological Trauma in Horses* (2013). Discover optimal saddle fit for you and your horse in a Saddlefit 4 Life 80 point diagnostic evaluation. www.saddlefit4life.com www.saddlesforwomen.com and guys too! 800-225-2242.

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