

PRUNING PRACTICES FOR THE HOME GARDENER

Pruning is least understood and most abused of all garden practices. Without an understanding of a plant's growth habits or ultimate size, when it flowers, improper pruning can harm the plants vitality and overall appearance. In the northern climates there is no foliage for 7 months so pruning practices really show themselves.

Human nature is to control. We plant whatever we want, wherever we want and then with pruning we control the plants growth. **We need to keep reminding plants just who is in control!**

Some Terminology to become familiar with

Terminal shoot: End of the branch or growing tip

Lateral shoots: side branching or buds just below the terminal shoot.

Branch collar: where smaller branch attaches to larger branch or trunk.

Current year wood: Stems growing from the crown of the plant. Usually have larger more tender leaves

2nd. year wood or 'old wood': Branches that overwinter. This wood has formed a layer of seasoned bark.

Heading back: to bring the overall size of the plant down and in (hand pruners, loppers or saw. Not shear's

Shearing: doing the above but using shears; either gas powered, electrical or hand.

Thinning out: remove crossing branches, branches running parallel, branches not conforming outline.

Tip pruning: cutting back the long shoots that usually develop after flowering in the summer.

Tools & how to keep them sharp

Hand pruners: for branches 3/4" and smaller. Sharpen with very small bastard file or sharpening stone.

Loppers: for branches 1" to 2". Sharpen with large bastard file or grinder

Shears: For giving plants a haircut Sharpen with large bastard file or grinder and be careful

Pruning saw, small & large: for branches over 2". Sharpen by professional

Chainsaw: For large branches. Sharpen by professional

These tools should last a lifetime if you purchase quality tools & keep them sharp

Why Pruning is needed

Train young plants: Establish the mature shape and branch structure when plant is young

Maintain health: Remove dead and dying branches, crossing branches rubbing on each other, parallel branches. Intent is to open the middle of the plants to allow for better circulation and light penetration.

Influence flowering: In order for a plant to flower it needs stored energy. If plants don't have this energy they will prefer more leaves to make more energy instead of spending energy on flowers. Creating a healthy environment through fertility, pruning and proper amounts of water will give you good flowering.

Compensate for root loss: When transplanting there is root loss. Compensate that loss by pruning the above ground portion.

Roots: Root pruning will encourage many more roots and allow for plants to take up more nutrients and potential flowers.

When should you prune: General rule is when pruners are sharp, or when leaves are off the plant so you can see what you're pruning.

Spring blooming plants: After blooming is done in the spring/early summer. These plants will be setting blossoms in the late summer/autumn of the year before, so if pruned in the fall or early spring you'll be removing flowers. Some examples include: Forsythia, Magnolia, Rhododendron, Lilac, Deutzia

Summer blooming plants: Prune in the spring or after blooming. Most of these plants set flowers on current year wood. Some examples include: some Hydrangea, Spirea, Butterfly bush, Beauty Bush, Ninebark

Plants prone to disease: When completely dormant (late fall or winter). Some examples being Flowering Crab, Elm, Hawthorn, Oaks, Beech.

Deciduous trees: When dormant but not always practical

Perennials: Whenever they start looking like they need to be cut back, usually after flowering. Some perennials will generate new blossoms when given a 'haircut'. Examples are Catmint, Tickseed, Daisies. Others stay looking good into the fall and I usually don't cut back until late October. Examples are Peony, Wild Indigo, Hosta foliage, Goatsbeard.

Grasses: Fall or Spring. When inflorescences are left on during the winter you can enjoy them, and the birds will too if they're a native species. The seeds are high in oils and fats, important for non-migrating birds during the winter. One must be wary of some of the grasses going to seed. If transplanting grasses do late in the fall or early spring.

Evergreens: After first flush of new growth in the early summer. This helps keep the tree full at the bottom. Larger limbs should be removed in late fall or winter.

Special Needs Plants

Roses: Light pruning in the fall to keep branches from breaking with winter snow. Prune to shape in the spring after buds start to swell. It is important to know what has survived the winter before cutting back. Be mindful of spring cold temps. Most gardeners suffer from "I must get into my garden" and it can lead to grabbing the pruners in late March, early April when we get a warm spell.

Hydrangea: These give me a headache when trying to explain. Below are general rules to follow.

- **Annabelle:** flower on new wood and can be cut back to ground in the fall or spring.
- **bigleaf:** flowers on old wood (some on old and new). Flowers should be removed in the fall and pruning done in the spring and only the branches that have died back. Cold temperatures in late winter will cause a lot of dieback that reduces flower production that summer.
- **panicked:** flower on new wood. Remove flowers in the fall and prune to thin and shape in the spring. The plant can be cut back hard in the spring and still produce ample flowers that same season.

- *oakleaf*: flowers on old wood. Should be pruned after blossoms, usually July.

Butterfly bush: This plant will make its way to the invasive species list if we don't keep it from spreading. This means pruning off blossoms in the fall.

Rhododendron

To shape prune during or soon after flowering (flowers can be brought inside and set in shallow vase). Pruning in this way will not affect flowering for the next season. To keep the plants more compact wait until the new terminal buds form. Pinch the terminal bud off. This will allow for the auxiliary buds to form lateral shoots. This will also allow for the potential for more flower buds to form because you have increased the number of new terminal shoots once the auxiliary shoots develop.

Weigela

This plant flowers on old wood so pruning after flowering is best. Pruning in the spring will not damage the plant but it won't give you the flower production desired. This plant can get leggy. It is a prime candidate for hard pruning, meaning cut to the ground and allow a new plant to grow up from the base.

Wisteria

Flowering is on old wood and new, but best on previous years. Flowers are developed on the short spur branches. In order to develop those branches pruning is done twice a year: in mid-summer and then in mid-winter. In mid-summer cut back the long shoot growth to about 5 buds. In the winter you will cut those same branches back to about 3 buds.

Plant rejuvenation

Some plants can become very leggy. Those include, but not exclusive to, Viburnum, bayberry, inkberry, Michigan holly, Weigela, Forsythia, lilac, rose of Sharon, red-stem & gray dogwood. In order to revitalize them when they get leggy there are two approaches.

#1. Cut them low to the ground and allow for a new plant to develop. I recommend doing this in the late spring. A considerable amount of energy is required to push out new growth. Once it gets started stand back. Don't worry about flowering at this time. You are starting with a new plant and you can use your pruning knowledge to shape it. Flowers will come later.

#2. Remove about 1/3 of the old growth, opening up the middle of the shrub to allow for light to penetrate. Wait one year and remove another third. After the third year you will have a plant that is more manageable with growth coming out of the base.

Where to prune

General rules #1: Just above a branch or bud. Make your cut at an angle when possible.

Types of plants to include: Flowering shrubs and trees

General rules #2: Shearing to shape, not being concerned with location of the cut. This is also referred to as giving your plant a haircut. Usually shearing is reserved for plants like boxwood, arborvitae, ect. There are some flowering plants that will perform well with shearing. Some examples of those plants are: Spirea, Potentilla, Genista, Deutzia.

General rules #3: Do not cut into the branch collar when pruning trees. The branch collar allows the tree to compartmentalize the injury created by the cut and minimize the damage. This is important to remember.

Plants not included in the above rules:

Evergreens: ½ of the new growth will promote lateral shoots and keep the plant more full.
Example: Christmas tree farms.

Perennial: #2 6-10" above the ground

Grasses: #2 6-8" above ground

How to prune

Without fear

Always use a sharp tool.

Try to cut at an angle if possible so water will run off the cut

Do not use tar or paint. If the cut is made properly the wound will heal.