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## Pruning

### Do's and Don'ts

Do not cut back everything in the yard in an attempt to make it all smaller again. Some plants like evergreens will never green up again, and other plants will re-grow with unnatural forms. It is better to slowly prune shrubs and trees to produce a healthy and attractive plant.

- A good pair of pruning shears is important before you begin.
- Prune from the bottom up and on large plants from the inside out.
- First prune out all of the old, dead wood.
- Prune to open up center areas and to clean up the base of shrubs.
- Selectively prune any branches that are touching the ground, crowding other plants, or come too close to the house, windows, or the walkway.

### Pruning Tools

Buy good quality pruning tools. Pruning tools will last for many years if they are cared for properly. Always dry and oil your tools thoroughly to prevent rust and to keep them sharp. Dull saws and shears make ragged cuts and can cause bruises to your trees by crushing the stems and damaging the cells, not to mention the potential danger to you. Always make sure pruning tools are sharp.

You will only need three pruning tools.

1. **Pruning shears** are used for small stems and twigs. The best type of pruners is a bypass pruner which works like a scissors.
2. **Lopping shears** are useful for branches that are finger size and larger. Lopping shears have long handles that extend your reach and give you leverage for more cutting strength.
3. **Pruning saws** are needed for larger branches and crowded areas. Do not use an ordinary carpenter saw. Its fine teeth will stick in live wood while the coarser teeth of a pruning saw are designed to cut cleanly through live wood.

Chain saws are not pruning tools! Chain saws are great to cut fire wood but should never be used to prune trees.

One final note on pruning tools: It is a good idea to disinfect all pruning tools with denatured ethyl alcohol or bleach before using them on your trees and shrubs in order to prevent the spread of disease.

### Pruning Shade Trees

Again, prune all dead wood first. The next step is to identify the best leader and lateral branches (scaffold limbs) and remove defective parts (Fig. 1). In trees with two leaders remove the one with a

crook or other defects, or that creates a lop-sided appearance. If there are any rubbing or crossing branches, the worst one of any pair should be pruned out.

Fig. 1 Pruning that should be done on this young tree.

Narrow branch angles signal a point of future weakness (Fig. 1). They are more likely to rip off in the wind, snow or ice storms. The reason is that as the two branches grow, neither has a sufficient space to add wood needed for strength. To prevent this and future expensive problems, remove one of the two branches. For strength, the ideal branching angle is approximately in the 10 or 2 o'clock position.

Water sprouts and suckers are "parasite" sprouts and can be found inside the crown or at the base of a tree (Fig. 1). They are rapidly growing, weakly attached and upright growing stems. They usually use more energy than they contribute, so it is best to remove them as soon as possible.

When pruning trees (and fruit trees) it is important to prune or cut close to the branch collar (Fig. 2). But do not cut into the branch collar. The collar is located at the base of the branch and is often recognizable as a bulge at the base of the branch. This area contains special cells under the bark that divide and grow over the wound eventually sealing it off. The collar must be left intact with the tree for rapid sealing. Based on current research, wound dressing or paint has not been proven to prevent or reduce decay.

Fig. 2 Sawed from above a large branch will tear bark from the trunk as it falls. Use the three-cut method to prevent damage. (1) About 1 foot out from the trunk cut halfway through the branch from underneath. (2) A few inches in from the first cut, saw off the branch from the top. (3) Remove the stub by cutting along, but never into, the branch collar.

Beeches, Birches, Maples and Walnuts should not be pruned in spring. If you do, they will bleed all over your pruning tools and your lawn. This bleeding is not a threat to the tree, but it is messy and unattractive. It is best to prune these trees in late summer (August) or early fall when the sap isn't flowing so freely.

The best time to prune Oak trees is between December and February to minimize the chance of oak wilt disease, a fungus disease. Oak trees should never be pruned between April 15 and July 1. If Oak trees are damaged by storms or construction during that period, apply a non-toxic pruning paint immediately (Pruning paint is not recommended for other pruning cuts or wounds.)

### **Fruit Trees**

Prune apples and pears in the early spring (March-April) before the trees break dormancy. For stone fruit that are susceptible to cankers caused by disease organisms, wait until bud break when they are less likely to be infected. Prune away dead and diseased branches on all kinds of fruit trees as the growing season continues. If summer pruning is necessary on apple, pear, flowering crabapple, mountain ash, hawthorn and cotoneaster, never prune during wet weather and disinfect pruning tools. This is done to prevent spreading fire blight since it can be easily spread during the growing season, especially on pruning tools. Stop all pruning by the end of August since fall pruning can stimulate a flush of new growth that could be damaged when cold weather sets in.

### **Shrubs**

Spring pruning stimulates the most rapid regrowth, so it is a good time for heavy pruning.

Some cane growing plants, such as weigela, dogwoods, hydrangea, and spirea, can be radically renovated by cutting them entirely to the ground. Spireas benefit from being cut to a few inches from the ground every few years also. If no radical pruning is needed, multiple stemmed shrubs benefit from removing 1/3 of the oldest canes every year (thinning cuts). When making a heading cut, always cut just above a bud or branch that is growing to the outside or in the direction you want the new growth to follow (Fig. 3).

Fig. 3 Correct and incorrect pruning cuts.

Do not prune shrubs during mid to late fall when their leaves are falling. Heading cuts made late in the season can stimulate soft new growth that is prone to damage in fall freezes.

Shrubs that bloom in spring should only be pruned right after they bloom. Prune spring flowering shrubs such as azaleas and forsythia after they finish blooming, so they will have time to grow and set new buds during the summer for next year.

### **Shrubs to be pruned after the blossoms have faded.**

Azalea  
Berberis (barberry)  
Deutzia  
Forsythia  
Flowering plums and cherries  
Lonicera (honeysuckle)  
Magnolias  
Philadelphus (mock orange)  
Physocarpus (ninebark)  
Spiraea (spring blooming varieties including bridal wreath)  
Syringa (lilac)  
Weigela

Summer blooming shrubs should be pruned in early spring. However, winter is also a good time to prune fruit trees, brambles, grapes and summer blooming shrubs (shrubs that form flowers on the current years wood) since it is easier to study a plant form when the leaves are absent.

### **Shrubs to be pruned before buds show green.**

Caragana – peashrub  
Caryopteris (bluebeard)  
Diervilla (bush honeysuckle)  
Euonymus  
Hamamelis virginiana (witch hazel)  
Hydrangea arborescens 'Grandiflora' & 'Annabelle'  
Hydrangea paniculata 'Grandiflora' (Peegee hydrangea)  
Hypericum (St. John's-wort)  
Potentilla (cinquefoil)  
Rhamnus frangula (buckthorn)  
Rhus – sumacs  
Ribes currant  
Garden roses

Spiraea (all summer blooming varieties)  
Symphoricarpos (coralberry, snowberry)  
Tamarix  
Viburnums

## Roses

Do not remove winter protection before April 15 or later depending on the weather. Just as growth starts, remove any dead or damaged wood leaving only healthy, white centered wood. Make each pruning cut at an angle  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch above an outward-facing bud. This stimulates outward-facing new growth (Fig. 4). Also remove any weak or crossing canes.

Fig. 4 Pruning above outward-facing buds.

Prune in early spring to keep hybrid teas, grandifloras and floribunda roses vigorous and blooming. Many of the newer shrub-type roses need very little pruning. Heritage species and climbing roses that bloom once a year bear flowers on the previous years growth. Prune these as soon as blooming is over, cutting the main shoots back  $\frac{1}{3}$  and removing any small, twiggy growth (do not cut these roses in the spring). Remove suckers coming up from the rootstock whenever you see them.

Prune during the growing season on hybrid teas, grandifloras and floribunda roses to encourage re-blooming. Cut above the bud at the base of a 5 leaflet leaf growing toward the outside of the plant.

## Evergreens

Most evergreens naturally shed their older, central needles in fall. There is only cause for alarm when the outside needles begin to drop.

As soon as the snow disappears trimming can begin. Heavy pruning should be done in April and May. Keep in mind though, that evergreens will not green up once they are cut back to un-needed wood. Branches cut back beyond the green needles will not sprout new growth. This means it is important to control the size of the plant early in its life and gradually. Radical renovation is impossible since cutting off more than  $\frac{1}{3}$  of the total green, may cause the plant to die.

The best time to shear and shape evergreens is when the new growth is about  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inches long (Fig. 5). On Yews shear off half of this growth. On Pines, spruces, and firs trim the candles when they are two inches long; trim back to an inch before they become woody. On Junipers and arborvitae trim when the new growth is five or six inches, cut it back to three inches. Later in the summer when the new growth appears, continue trimming to look neat and natural.

Fig. 5 Pruning evergreens (candle stage).

Electric hedge trimmers are great time savers when it comes to shearing evergreens. If possible shear all narrow leafed evergreens such as spruce, pines, firs, etc. when they are wet (after a rain or when the trees are covered with dew). When they are damp, the sheared ends will not turn brown right after they are cut. Do not worry if you must shear these evergreens when it is dry, since the browning will eventually disappear. Wet shearing, however, does not have any advantage on cedar, junipers or arborvitae.

## **Rhododendrons & Azaleas**

Azaleas and Rhododendrons should be planted under deep rooted trees like Oaks or Pines. Shallow rooted trees such as Maples and Birches will compete for nutrients and moisture. Azaleas and Rhododendrons do not need much pruning, however pruning to shape or reduce size may be desired. Broad-leafed evergreens will tolerate severe pruning unlike the other evergreens. Pruned plants will not have as many blooms the following season, but will bloom more profusely in the years to come.

Rhododendrons exposed to the winter sun will be brown in the spring and most of the flower buds will be killed. By stretching burlap around a wooden frame to shade the plant from the winter sun and dehydrating winds, you can enjoy the beauty of this plant in glorious bloom next spring.

Rhododendrons and azaleas are among the hardiest of plants. But even cold hardy plants need additional protection. Make sure plants are going into winter with adequate moisture. Water well if we don't receive enough rainfall. Wait until the ground freezes, then place a thick mulch around the plant(s). This will help the ground frozen until the real spring thaw occurs.

These are only a few tips on proper pruning techniques and the appropriate time to prune. The Minnesota Extension Service offers a publication written by Mervin C. Eisel called "Pruning Trees and Shrubs" and a book written by Lewis Hill called "Pruning Simplified." These are two publications that will also help to answer some of your pruning questions.