

Urban Horticulture Note No. 9

Pruning Basics

WHY PRUNE

There are several basic reasons to prune an ornamental.

- The "three 'D's" - Dead, Diseased, and Damaged branches. These types of branches should be cut out whenever you see them.
- Size Control - Many plants may have simply gotten too large for the intended space. They may even create a safety hazard, interfering with views, lighting, or access. You may need to consider replacing the plant with something of a more appropriate size.
- Aesthetics - Some plants are being grown for a particular shape or form. This is often a matter of personal taste.
- Plant Health - Pruning allows more light and air to circulate in the canopy, which can reduce insect and disease problems.
- Flowering - For certain shrubs, selective cuts can be made to promote flowering.

WHEN TO PRUNE

Whatever the reason for pruning, timing is a key factor for successful results. Most horticulturists agree that late winter and early spring are the best times to prune. The key here is before bud break. This is true for summer flowering trees and shrubs and most evergreen shrubs.(Spring-flowering shrubs will be discussed later) Pruning will be stressful on plants, and one of the most stressful periods is during bud break and leaf expansion in the spring....plants are depending on stored food supplies for these action times. Therefore it is recommended to complete the pruning chores before then. The following is a partial list of plants that are best pruned in late winter/early spring.

Abelia	Hypericum
Callicarpa	Ligustrum
Buddleia	Hollies
Chaste-tree	Nandina
Crapemyrtle	Photinia
Hibiscus	Waxmyrtle
Roses	Junipers (tip prune or light shaping only)

Many North Carolina gardens are centered on spring-flowering shrubs. As a general rule...prune these plants after they complete their spring show of blooms. The following is a partial list of trees and shrubs that fall into this category.

Azalea	Barberry	Cotoneaster
Rhododendron	Blueberry	Flowering Dogwood

Euonymus	Bush Honeysuckle	Styrax
Forsythia	Winter Jasmine	Viburnum
Quince	Magnolia	

There are numerous plants that are not mentioned on these lists. This listing is intended as a general guideline for the most standardized plants. There are always exceptions to the rule as to when to prune, such as the barberry that has gotten so large that it is actually hazardous to walk nearby. In this situation, I recommend pruning immediately. You may miss a spring flower display, but you will eliminate the overgrown thorny branches. New growth will begin in spring and foliage will look great for the summer.

HOW TO PRUNE

There are three basic pruning techniques for shrubs:

- Heading back is used to control the size of the bush. Individual branches are shortened.
- Thinning means removing an entire branch back to the main trunk or ground. It is used to "open up" bushes that have grown too thick.
- Shearing is used to clip foundation shrubs such as hollies and boxwoods.

PRUNING TOOLS

There are a few pruning tools which all home gardeners and landscape professionals should have.

- Two pairs of hand pruners, one anvil style, the other by-pass (scissor).
- A pair of loppers with the ability to cut 1-2" branches.
- A pruning saw or bow saw.

Tools should be kept sharp and rust free. This will extend their life, and make your work easier. Use standard solvents (found in most garages) to clean the blades. The scissor/by-pass style hand pruners allow you to make a very close cut, while the anvil-style can cut a slightly larger branch. If you are trimming rose bushes or fruit trees, disinfect the blades with alcohol, between prunings. The bow saw is a safe way to trim larger branches. If power-trimming equipment is used for the hedges, try not to cut the larger stems and branches. Most of the blades can handle up to one-half inch stems and still make a smooth, clean cut. Save these larger stems and branches for the loppers.

HOW MUCH TO PRUNE

In general, the "one-third" rule is a good guide. Try not to take out more than one-third of a plant at a time. This could be stressful to the plant, possibly causing it more harm than good.

However, there are many broadleaf ornamentals that would benefit from a severe pruning, as every year they get bigger and bigger. The easy rule of thumb to remember is that the faster and larger a shrub grows, the more you can cut it back...and the better the chances are that you won't kill it! Plants that respond to severe pruning are: Chinese and

Japanese Holly cultivars, Photinia, Ligustrum, Osmanthus, Elaeagnus, Waxmyrtle, Rose of Sharon, Hydrangea, and Spiraea.

Although a severe pruning will make them smaller, realize that this measure is only temporary. In a few years, you'll probably need to repeat the process. Consider creating a multi-stem, small tree from the overgrown shrub. Instead of trimming the entire top off, remove many of the lower branches all the way to the ground. Leave 3-4 well-spaced branches and thin the top. If sprouts appear at the base, keep them trimmed off. Once created, the tree form plant will require much less attention over the years. Favorites for this category include Burford holly, photinia, camellia japonica and sasanqua, waxmyrtle and amelanchier.

SPECIFIC PLANTS:

Narrow leaf evergreens: One can severely damage (kill) narrow leaf evergreens by pruning severely. This includes the pfitzer, hetz, Andorra and shore junipers, false cypress, cedars and arborvitae. Narrow-leaf evergreens can be categorized in several height categories: groundcovers and low growing shrubs, medium growing shrubs (3-8 feet) large growing, upright shrubs or small trees(8-20') and trees (20' -60'). To avoid the problem of damaging a cedar or juniper by harsh pruning, be sure to plant in a site that can accommodate the particular plant you have chosen.

Ornamental Grasses: February is the time to cut them back and look forward to new spring growth. Pampas grass, northern sea oats, Japanese blood grass, miscanthus and pennisitum species are ready candidates for the hedge shears or machete. Gloves and long sleeves are also in order for this garden task, even if you do catch a mild afternoon. If the clumps are getting too large for the intended space, it is also recommended (easier said than done) to dig up and divide. This is especially true for pampas grass.

Liriope and mondo grass: Raise the mowing height on the mower for large beds or use a string trimmer to cut the tops off. Don't cut down into the crown of the plant.

Perennials: The tops of most perennials can be removed this time of year. Rudbeckia, sedum, verbena, daylily, lantana, coneflower, sages, salvia and many herbs are all good candidates for cleaning up. Add the tops to the compost pile.

TREES

For minor pruning cuts on trees, you will need the bow saw or pruning saw. The cut should be made just outside the "branch collar," a region of slightly raised bark at the base of each branch. This will allow the tree to heal itself naturally. Pruning sealants are NOT recommended. A pole saw might come in handy for higher branches, but take precautions to avoid injury from falling branches.

Before cutting a tree branch, make a small cut on the bottom side of the branch. Otherwise, the weight of the branch may cause bark to peel off the tree.

In general, topping is not recommended. It is extremely stressful on trees, and the regrowth tends to be structurally weak. If the tree is too large for the site, considering spending a few extra dollars to have it removed, then replace it with something more appropriate.

Remember, tree work can be dangerous. Leave the big jobs to the experienced professionals. When hiring someone for tree work, take the following steps:

1. Ask for recommendations from friends and neighbors. Or look in the yellow pages. Ask them if they are a "Certified Arborist." Certified Arborists must pass an exam and receive advanced training.
2. Get estimates from two or three services. Be sure you have a clear idea of what the estimate includes. Take down only? Take down and removal? Stump grinding? Ask them for references.
3. Before hiring someone, ask if they carry insurance. They should have insurance to cover damage to property (both yours and your neighbors), as well as injury to their employees. Verify by asking for a copy of the policy or calling their insurance company.

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