

Pruning Trees & Shrubs

One of the tasks that all gardeners must face is pruning trees and shrubs. Questions often arise about timing, techniques, and other issues. This guide answers many of those questions and will help you keep your landscape looking great all year long.

Before grabbing the pruners and saws, take a few minutes to evaluate the condition of your trees and shrubs. Have a reason for pruning before you start. The three main types of pruning are corrective, structural, and rejuvenation.

- **Corrective pruning** removes dead, damaged, or diseased branches. A clean-cut branch will heal more quickly than a storm damaged branch. This type of pruning should be done any time of year that the damage appears or is noticed.
- **Structural pruning** improves the form and appearance of the plant. Look for crossing or rubbing branches and remove the weaker of the two. Also look for branches with “included” bark and remove these. Included bark looks like the bark is folded into trunk of the tree. This weak point is susceptible to storm damage and insect infestation. Next, look at the over-all form of the plant. How is it “suppose” to look? Are the branches ascending, spreading, or arching? Remove any branches that are out of place or over-crowded. Be careful not to destroy the plant’s natural form.
- **Rejuvenation pruning** usually applies only to shrubs when they have become quite large and over-grown. The procedure will be described below.

After you see the need to prune, consider the time of year. The optimum time of year for most plants is late winter when the plant is still dormant. It is akin to having surgery under general anesthesia. When the plant resumes growth in the spring there is little shock or stress from the pruning. Additionally, you are able to see the branching patterns without foliage blocking the view. The second best time of year is in mid-summer after the plant’s initial growth has slowed. Pruning should be avoided when the plant is actively growing in the spring or when the foliage is turning colors in the fall. There are some exceptions. Maples and birches should ideally be pruned in mid-summer to avoid excessive sap loss. Newly planted trees should not be pruned at all (except for corrective pruning) during the first two years. The plant needs as much foliage as possible to gather energy to invest in building a strong root system.

The next step is to gather the necessary tools. Good quality tools with sharpened blades make the cleanest cuts and are easier to use. The most essential tool is the hand pruner. Always use the “by-pass” type that cuts the branch; avoid the “anvil” type that can crush the branch. This pruner can be used on branches up to one inch in diameter. We recommend Felco pruners for their high quality, ease of maintenance, and comfortable grip. The next tool to have is a lopper. This is similar to the hand pruner, but with longer handles and a larger blade. Again, select a by-pass lopper and avoid the anvil type. This can be used on branches up to two inches in diameter. Larger branches will require the use of a pruning saw. These hand saws have razor sharp teeth on a slightly curved blade for quick and easy cutting. We prefer the folding type that is safe and compact for storage. These will cut branches up to four inches in diameter. Branches larger than this will require the use of a chainsaw by a professional arborist. Another time to call in the professionals is if branches to be removed are high in the tree. Ladders are dangerous when pruning. It is easy to lose your balance or be knocked off by a falling branch. Regarding safety, leather gloves and safety glasses should always be worn when pruning.



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Now to make the first cut. Look closely at the point where the branch meets the trunk. There should be a slight ridge or bulge where the two join. This is called the branch bark ridge and it will heal over the wound. Make your pruning cut about one quarter inch from the collar. Do not leave a long stub, but do not make a flush cut either. When removing larger branches, use the three-cut pruning method to prevent the falling branch from stripping bark from the trunk. First, make a cut on the under side of the branch about six inches away from the trunk. Only cut one quarter the way through the branch. Second, make a cut on the top side of the branch a few inches out from the first cut. The branch will break off between these two cuts. Finally, remove the remaining stub with a clean cut just beyond the branch bark ridge. Pruning cuts should always be left open to air circulation. Never use pruning sealers or tar.



Branch Bark Ridge



Initial Cut



Second Cut



Final Cut

Rejuvenation pruning is often used to breathe new life into an over-grown shrub. There are two types. The first is total rejuvenation. The entire plant is cut down to a few inches of stubble and allowed to re-grow in the spring. This severe pruning only needs to be done once every three to four years, but must be done during winter dormancy to avoid shock. It works well on spireas, beautyberry, caryopteris, and other twiggy shrubs. Flowering may be reduced with some plants during the first year of re-growth, but the plant will look much more attractive. The second type of rejuvenation pruning involves a step-wise approach. It works well on old-fashioned lilacs, arrowwood viburnums, red-stemmed dogwoods and other large suckering shrubs. Each winter, remove a few of the oldest gnarly branches. Vigorous new shoots will arise from the roots to replace what was removed. This method is best done during winter dormancy, and will be less disruptive to the plant's flowering cycle.

Hedge trimming is the final type of pruning that most gardeners encounter. The best tool is a well-sharpened, scissors-type hedge shears. Electric or gas powered trimmers can be used, but they do not produce especially clean cuts. Shearing any hedge is best done in early spring just before new growth begins. Plants can be trimmed again in mid summer if needed, but avoid trimming any hedge in August or September as new growth will not have time to harden off before winter. Trim off only the shaggy new growth. Do not cut back as far as bare wood because some plants are not able to recover from such aggressive pruning.

We hope this answers most of your pruning questions. If you have other questions or need advice on pruning specific types of plants, feel free to ask one of our staff members. Knowing these basic pruning techniques will have you on your way to a beautiful, healthy, and well-kept landscape!