

Pruning Improvement

SHARPEN YOUR SKILLS

Pruning, it is said by professional horticulturists, “is not for the faint of heart”. It is a rare individual that has the confidence and knowledge to prune a plant correctly, to lop limbs and branches with abandon is something few of us have the nerve to do. However, by following a few tips you may be well on your way to becoming a pruning guru and if through overzealousness with the pruners the plant dies; plant another.

Why prune? On some plants the constant reinvigoration is necessary to produce a quality garden specimen. Spring flowering shrubs benefit from pruning to maintain flower and general health. Often in the garden, plants grow much faster than their native counterparts; hence many branches and stems may clog the plant and weaken it. Gradual and often yearly or bi-yearly removal of some of these old or excess branches can increase plant vigour and produce a nicely formed and floriferous garden specimen.

The basic rules of pruning woody shrubs are quite simple; through a series of simple steps the mysteries of pruning become clear. Pruning of any sort does not discourage plant growth, in fact it does the opposite, and it encourages growth. The healthy plants natural response to a loss of vegetation is to replace it, thus when pruning try to remove no more than one third of the plants mass. This will keep the plant in balance. Also it is wise to remember that with the exception of hedges and topiary (topiary should be illegal) restricting the size of the plant through pruning is unwise as it will over time exhaust the plant. Our landscape will soon be dotted with those pathetic clipped balls and cubes of Forsythias vainly trying to flower in their restricted straight jackets. These are followed in June by faint bursts of tortured white flowers from the Spiraea. These plants controlled in their form are painfully stressed and bear little resemblance to their natural form. Pruning should be used to improve plant form and health not control plant size. If a shrub is too large for the area in which it is planted then you have the wrong plant.

The first thing a horticulturist looks for when pruning is damaged, diseased or dead wood. The three D's of pruning are without a doubt the most important aspect and can be applied to both trees and shrubs and, for the most part, can be undertaken any time of year.

Next, look for branches that interfere or rub against each other. As a new pair of shoes (until worn in) will chaff the skin, the constant irritation or rubbing of branches opens the bark of the plant to possible disease. When deciding which of the offending branches to remove we need to plan a little further ahead by allowing the branch that is the most vigorous and has the best form to remain. When removing branches from shrubs, leave no stubs, yet at the same time try not to scuff the bark of surrounding branches with your loppers as you manoeuvre them into place.



One of the final steps, depending on the type of plant to be pruned, is removal of very old branches. By removing old branches, often thicker than your thumb, you reinvigorate the plant and encourage new shoots to expand and others to sprout.

Of course with anything horticultural one must know your victim. Spring flowering shrubs should be pruned immediately after flowering. Pruning late in the year removes already developed flower buds lessening the show the following spring. Common spring flowering shrubs include Forsythia, Lilac and flowering Currants. Summer flowering shrubs can be pruned in the early spring such as Potentilla while later flowering species such as Spiraea should be pruned immediately after they flower.

Not all shrubs are pruned for flower, the Red Twig Dogwood is pruned to encourage new stem growth; the younger stems being the brightest red colour. In cases where the new twigs are the main reason for including this plant in the garden a simple technique is to lop all branches back to about 4-6” each spring.

One of the most useful books, which have easy to follow directions and plenty of illustrations, is the ‘Cavendish Encyclopaedia of Pruning and Training’.

With your Felco pruners (your Christmas gift) you are now permitted to unleash your pent-up winter gardening urges on that unruly Forsythia that has been mocking you from the back corner of the garden. Good luck; a replacement Forsythia is only \$14.95.

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