

Pruning Know-How

Pruning is the removal of plant parts to enhance the health, aesthetic appearance and/or fruiting ability of the plant. Some gardeners may find pruning a little intimidating, but if you start with a basic knowledge of your plant's natural form, an understanding of the reasons for pruning & the right tools for the job, pruning can be a pleasurable & rewarding gardening task.

WHY SHOULD I PRUNE?

- To improve the quality of flowers, fruit, foliage or stems
- To maintain plant health
- To obtain a balance between growth and flowering
 - To restrict growth
- To train the plant

WHERE TO START...

When you're planning your garden, research the natural forms of the plants you are considering. For example lilacs have a natural V-shape & deodora cedars are weeping. Pruning these plants into "meatball" shapes is harmful to the plants. Unnecessary pruning can be avoided if you choose plants that are suitable for the site. If a shrub naturally grows to 5 ft. (1.5 m) in diameter, fitting it in to a 2-foot-square (0.6 m) corner would result in a maintenance problem. If you inherited a landscaped site, the selections have already been made for you. The next step is to find out how to prune if needed.

WHEN TO PRUNE

Do not prune just because it is spring, some plants react differently than others to pruning. If in doubt a safe rule of thumb would be to follow the 3 D's - prune only if it is deformed, damaged or diseased. Even better, speak to one of our knowledgeable staff members about the plant in question, they'll be able to tell you if it will benefit from pruning.

Light Pruning

We are often asked "When is the best time to prune my tree?" If the plant needs only a light shearing or pruning for shape, it can be done at any time of the year. Take no more than 5-10% of the total volume off.

Heavy Pruning

If your plant needs heavy renovations (such as removing up to a third of the plant mass) it should be done in the spring before the first flush of growth & after the last hard frost. The cuts will soon be covered up by the new spring growth.

BASIC GUIDELINES

Deciduous Plants

Most deciduous plants (those that drop their leaves during winter) can be pruned in the winter when they are dormant. The exception is deciduous shrubs that flower on last year's wood (usually spring or early-summer flowering plants such as forsythia & spiraea). These should be pruned right after they finish flowering to let the new flush of growth ripen for next year's blooms. Maples should be pruned when in full leaf mid-June/July.

Broad-leaved Evergreens

Evergreens such as rhododendrons, should not be pruned except when used for hedging material (for example English Laurel) or when there is severe crossing over.

Cedar Hedging

Light pruning at any time of the year is fine for coniferous hedges & plantings, but heavy pruning (with the exception of yews) is not recommended as cedar hedging has a "dead zone" inside the plant. Light is unable to penetrate to this area and thus no growth occurs (see illustration below). Even if light reaches the area, there are no growth buds to facilitate growth, so you will be left with an open unattractive "dead hole" in your hedging.



Roses & Clematis

Refer to our "Growing Healthy Roses" and our "Clematis" caresheets for special pruning requirements.

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TOOLS

The right tools for the right job always makes a gardener's life a little easier & safer. The list below will help you choose the tools you need for your specific garden, but if you come in & visit us, our GARDENWORKS staff will be happy to assist you in our tool department & show you the different models available & how they work. We'll help you find the tool(s) that fit your needs & budget.

Hand Pruners

These are used for pruning out branches that are no larger than 3/4 inch (2 cm) thick. This gardener's friend should always be kept clean & out of the soil: soil granules will easily dull the blades. Never force a pruner to cut (using both hands to squeeze down on the handles). If you need to use force, you should be using lopping shears.

Head Shears

This tool is used for shaping hedges & shearing formal shrubs. Select shears that are durable as well as light-weight. Try extending your arm with shears in hand to estimate the weight, & imagine spending hours with it extended.

Pruning Saws

These are used for pruning heavier branches, 2 inches (5 cm) & up in diameter. Unlike the carpenter's saw, the pruning saw cuts on "pull" rather than on "push". Pruning saws can be purchased in a foldable form for added safety or with a holster to attach to your belt (a real asset when climbing a tree).

Lopping Shears

These long-handled pruners provide more leverage to cut wood up to 1 1/4 inches (3 cm) in thickness. The heavy-duty, double action & ratchet type can easily handle wood up to 1 3/4 inches (4.5 cm).

HOW TO PRUNE

Before you make the first cut, always picture in your mind how the plant will look without that particular limb. When pruning, always prune to either the next growth bud that is facing outwards (away from the centre of the plant) or to the junction where the limb meets the plant. NEVER leave a stub! Stubs allow access to the plant for diseases & infection.

Always cut out dead, diseased or damaged materials first (the 3 D's). Trace the dead branch or limb to where there is live wood (check by gently scraping the bark to see if the layer underneath is white or light green) & cut just below that at a growth bud.

Next prune out all crossing branches. Crossing branches will become large limbs that will rub against each other & cause damage to the plant in the future.

Stand back to see if you need to do any further pruning. For ornamental deciduous shrubs & trees, the branches should be encouraged to grow outwards. This allows good light penetration. Prune out branches that tend to grow inwards.

THE SAFE WAY TO REMOVE LARGE LIMBS

If in doubt ask for help from a certified arborist. If the branches you want to remove are a manageable size then follow these directions. First reduce the size of your branch to a manageable and safe level by removing several small pieces with your pruning saw, then make an upward cut half-way through the branch at position A (see diagram below). Trim the branch at position B to remove the branch. Make your final clean cut at position C.

How To remove a large limb using a pruning saw

