

Pruning, Demystified

Be A Barber, Not A Butcher

C.L. Fornari

People prune plants to improve the appearance of the plant, promote flowering and fruiting, remove diseased or overcrowded growth, & to create topiary shapes. If trying to control size, *you must start early*.

There are three types of cuts: thinning, renewal and heading back.

Thinning: cutting off a branch or twig either at its point of origin on the parent stem or back to a lateral branch or to the ground. Thinning results in a more open plant but does not change the plant's natural look and habit. Saws, pruners and loppers are used to make thinning cuts.

Heading Back: cutting back of branches anywhere along their length. Shearing is heading back that results in a formal shape (balls and cubes) – and is most appropriate for topiary and hedges. Heading back cuts result in concentrated new growth just below the cut. Shearing is done with scissors, hedge shears, or power shearing tools.

Renewal: Often used to salvage overgrown or leggy shrubs. Gradual renewal is done over three or more years. A third of the oldest stems are cut to the ground (or up to a foot high) the first year, the next third the second year and the last on the third year. New shoots that grow as a result of this pruning can be thinned to the strongest branches. Drastic renewal is done in the *spring only*, when all the stems are cut very short. Sometimes the plant does not come back after a drastic renewal pruning. Renewal pruning is done with loppers or a saw.

Essential Tools: by-pass pruners, loppers, a saw. Optional: shearing tool

General Rules of Thumb:

1. Whenever possible, prune for appearance, not to control size.
2. With some exceptions, prune spring-flowering plants right after they bloom and summer-flowering plants in late-winter or early spring.
3. Remember that pruning usually stimulates growth, and the more you remove, the more the plant will try to quickly replace what it's lost. Heavy pruning can cause "suckers" and "water spouts."
4. You can prune evergreens anytime, but if new growth is cut when fresh and still growing, this will stimulate bushier growth.

5. Always remove dead wood first – then anything that looks diseased, weak or damaged. Next, remove crossed branches or those growing in the wrong direction, or those that make the plant lopsided.
6. Control direction of new growth by making cuts above buds or leaves facing in the direction of desired growth. New growth will start from where the leaf meets the stem just under the cut.
7. Prune roses, butterfly bush, caryopteris (blue mist shrub), pink-flowering spireas, St. John's wort, and other summer bloomers in the spring. Radical pruning in the fall can cause winter loss.
8. When broadleaf evergreens are planted in the right location they require little pruning. Remove deadwood and odd, lopsided growth.
9. Multi-stemmed shrubs such as forsythia, red-twig dogwood, big-leaf hydrangeas, leucothoe and kerria get pruned by removing oldest stems at the ground. Remove a third of the oldest every year.
10. Mound-like plants such as spring-blooming spirea and wigelia should be pruned by cutting selected stems back inside the plant (so the cuts don't show) Thicken growth with heading cuts.
11. Prune new growth on azaleas while it's new and tender – cut each new shoot in half to promote bushiness.
12. Whenever possible, do not cut the central leader on trees.
13. Large branches and limbs of trees should be cut in the "branch collar" – the curved area where the branch meets the trunk. *Don't* make the cut flush with the trunk of the tree.
14. Pines, firs and spruce *seldom* produce new growth from older wood – to keep these plants thick and bushy you can cut the new growth by a third when it is still young and tender. Once the plant is overgrown it is too late for corrective pruning.
15. Prune birch, maple, elm and dogwood in early winter after leaves have fallen. These plants bleed sap if pruned in the spring.
16. When in doubt, remove deadwood, take off anything weak or funky, take out crossed branches and those growing into the center of the plant. Then stop. If the plant looks good, you're done.