

Pruning

Pruning is one of the least understood practices of landscape maintenance. Before attempting to prune your landscape shrubs and trees, consider the basic principles of pruning. Review these considerations before starting to prune your landscape plants.

Reasons for Pruning

- To maintain or limit the size and shape of a plant to avoid its overpowering the landscape.
- To remove undesirable growth that distracts from the balance or symmetry of the plant.
- To remove diseased, dead, or abnormal plant tissue.
- To stimulate flowering and/or fruit production of old plants.
- To develop a specific plant form, such as a hedge or an espalier.
- To direct or train trees to grow in a particular form to eliminate problems.
- To remove plant parts that may interfere with structures or utility lines or that may create a visibility problem.

How To Prune

How to prune depends on the plant type. Most landscape plants are divided into three categories: broadleaf evergreens, narrowleaf evergreens, or deciduous plants. Each type has specific responses to pruning. Know your plant type before you begin pruning.

Broadleaf Evergreen Plants

Broadleaf evergreen plants have broad, wide, or flat leaves. The shedding of old leaves and the growth of new ones are synchronized so that the plant is rarely, if ever, without leaves; thus, the term "evergreen". Examples of broadleafed evergreen plants include hollies, ligustrum (privet), photinia (red tip), elaeagnus, euonymus, cleyera, azaleas, pyracantha, nandina, gardenia, pittosporum, sweet olive, boxwood, camellia, aucuba, mahonia, fatsia, and southern magnolia.

Along the limbs, branches, and trunks of broadleaf evergreen plants are specialized cells (latent buds) that have the potential to become a growing bud. A latent bud remains dormant until stimulated into growth. The presence of these specialized cells (latent buds) permits drastic pruning of these plants without fear of killing them.

Some broadleaf evergreens may be dwarf plants. Dwarf plants normally have a compact, dense growth habit and do not need much pruning to control size or shape. Tip pruning may be used to encourage a thick, well-shaped plant; however, after many years, some dwarf shrubs may need rejuvenating. They can be pruned severely (6 to 12 inches from the ground) with satisfactory results. Use this method of pruning in early spring, before new growth begins.

Some broadleaf evergreens are large, vigorous growers and may need yearly pruning to control their sizes or shapes. Tip pruning each year controls size or shape and is a good

practice for the fast-growing, broadleaf evergreen plants.

Narrowleaf Evergreen Plants

Narrowleaf evergreens are landscape shrubs and trees that do not tolerate severe pruning.

The narrowleaf evergreens have tiny, scale-like or needle-like leaves. Many produce a fruit-like cone; thus the nickname "conifers". Examples of narrowleaf evergreens include junipers, arborvitae, pine, cedar, and spruce. Narrowleaf evergreen shrubs need occasional foliage shearing in early spring to control size. Narrowleaf evergreens, such as junipers and arborvitae, do not have latent buds; therefore, you cannot prune them as severely as broadleaf evergreens.

Narrowleaf evergreens often are regarded as having a "dead zone", which is located on the older portions of the branches of the plant. To avoid the "dead zone", never remove more than one-third of the foliage of a narrowleaf evergreen. If you remove all the scales or needles with a pruning cut, no new growth will occur on the remaining limb, and drastic pruning of narrow-leaved evergreen plants can kill them.

Prune conifers, such as pines, by removing a portion of the "candle". The "candle" refers to the candle-like appearance of the new growth on the tips of pines in early spring. Once the "candle" has matured, buds present on it usually will not develop and grow; however, removal of the tip of the candle before it matures can stimulate buds into growth.

Deciduous Landscape Plants

Deciduous landscape plants have leaves as the broadleaf evergreens but shed their leaves in the fall. Like the broadleaf evergreens, deciduous plants can be severely pruned without fear of killing them. Deciduous plants may be shrubs, trees, or vines. Some common deciduous shrubs and trees used in landscapes include forsythia, spiraea, weigela, lilac, rose, crape myrtle, quince, honeysuckle, hydrangea, oak, maple, and poplar.

Deciduous shrubs may need pruning to control the size and shape of the plant. Light to moderate tip pruning encourages thick new growth, resulting in bushy plants. Deciduous plants also may be pruned by rejuvenation and thinning, which are normally completed before new growth begins in the spring.

Pruning Methods

Tip Pruning encourages a thick, well-shaped plant. Light tip pruning removes only a few inches of stem tips. You usually use this method of pruning in early spring after new growth has occurred.

Thinning is used on broadleaf, deciduous landscape plants to encourage flowering and strong growth. This method of pruning is performed (in early spring before new growth begins) by removing older or weaker branches back to a lateral branch or completely to the ground.

Shearing controls the shape and size of all types of shrubs. Shearing calls for clipping the newest foliage, usually 1 to 2 inches of new growth. Actually, shearing is a type of tip pruning that removes minimal foliage. Broadleaf evergreen hedges and screens are often sheared to promote thick, dense foliage. Always use sharp shears when shearing landscape plants.

Rejuvenation is severe pruning used only on broadleaf evergreens and deciduous plants to control overgrown, leggy, and straggly plants. Use this method of pruning in early spring before the beginning of new growth. A special form of rejuvenation pruning is used for clump-forming shrubs such as nandina and mahonia. One-third of the oldest limbs are removed each year.

Espalier trains a plant to grow against a wall. A tall wall is best for espaliered plants. Pruning may be necessary several times throughout the growing season to acquire the desired shape and form.

Topiary is the art of shaping plants into fantastic or ornamental forms by careful pruning or trimming. Topiary pruning may be necessary several times during the growing season. Broadleaf and narrowleaf trees and shrubs normally respond well as topiaries.

Removing tree limbs requires a special pruning technique. Tree limbs that need pruning should be cut so no stub remains. Do not remove the branch collar. Cut in such a way as to allow the limb to fall without ripping the bark down the tree trunk.

Timing

The time of year that you prune plants is important. Pruning at the wrong time may stimulate new growth that could be damaged by early frosts or freezes. It could also remove flower buds that have formed, reducing next year's flowers. The following guidelines will help you prune your plants at the proper time. Most pruning is for size control, and is best done in late winter through early spring.

Prune after the landscape feature of your plant has passed. For spring flowering plants, prune in late spring as the flowering season is ending; this allows for adequate growth during the summer to produce flower buds for the next year. For fall-flowering plants, such as some of the camellias, use tip pruning or thinning method. Prune as the flowering season is ending. For plants with colorful berries, prune after the berries are gone.

For plants that produce flowers on one-year-old wood (usually those that bloom after June), such as hydrangeas, glossy abelia, and crape myrtle, cut away only those branches with spent flowers or prune (thinning method) in late winter to promote vigorous spring growth.

Easy and Safe Pruning

You may have plants that need pruning often because they overgrow their planting space each season. If you find yourself constantly pruning to keep these plants within bounds,

an easy solution is to remove such plants and replace them with ones more suited to that planting area.

Never prune plants without proper equipment. Be sure your equipment is sharp and clean. Clean equipment helps prevent the spread of disease organisms; sharp equipment makes cutting easier.

Pruning Equipment

- anvil-type hand shears
- electric hedge shears
- heavy duty lopper for large branches
- lopper for branches
- hedge shears
- pruning knife
- scissor-type hand shears
- pruning saw
- pole pruner for high branches
- power saw for large limbs