WHY PRUNING IS IMPORTANT

Pruning is essential to plants’ health, beauty, and safety. Keep all of these priorities—and a few others—in mind when you prune.

Regular and corrective pruning keeps trees, shrubs, and woody vines healthy by eliminating some problems and preventing others. Generally, pruning encourages new growth and vigor. Removing select branches lets light and air reach more parts of the plant. The ongoing priorities of pruning are the same for any plant: Remove damaged, diseased, or dead parts. When left on the plant, these parts become a harbor for pests and disease.

Prune With a Purpose

Accomplish other goals with pruning, improving the plant one way or another. Pruning is necessary when limbs create a safety issue, such as leaning precariously over a house or reaching overhead wires. These situations should be handled by a pro. When you wish to see more flowers or fruit on roses, raspberries, apples, camellias, or others, pruning is needed. Pruning also helps reveal the colorful bark of trees such as river birch and paperbark maple. And pruning prompts new colorful stems of shrubs, such as dogwood or kerria.

You can control a plant’s size with good pruning, whether you have a shrub planted too close to the house, an overly assertive vine, or a shapely topiary. Similarly, pruning helps maintain a plant’s natural form or creates a formal shape. It depends on the plant and your goal, whether you have a casual hedge of lilacs or a tidy border of boxwoods.

In the long run, pruning helps preserve a plant’s integrity and your investment in it. Trees, shrubs, and woody vines vary in their growth habits and needs for pruning. Pruning helps you get to know your plants better and prompt them to become their best.

PRUNING SAFELY

Pruning can be hazardous. Common sense and the proper use of the right equipment will help keep you safe while pruning.

- Dress appropriately for pruning, wearing long pants, long-sleeved shirt, gloves, safety glasses, and nonskid shoes. A brimmed hat keeps the sun from obscuring your vision.
- Keep tools sharp and clean. Store a sharp tool in a protective sheath, if possible. Carry pruning tools with the points facing down.
- Choose a clear, still, dry day for pruning.
- If you must prune from a stepladder, tie it securely to the tree. Keep one hand on the ladder and one hand on your pruning saw. Station someone on the ground to help secure the ladder.
THE RIGHT WAY TO PRUNE

You’ll avoid common pruning mistakes when you follow these simple guidelines.

Pruning is not complicated once you understand a few basic principles that will help ensure your success. These guidelines hold true whether you’re pruning trees or shrubs.

Choose the Right Tool
Always use clean, sharp tools. Select the right-size tool for the branch you will prune to avoid damage to the plant and the tool. Use a pruning saw on branches larger than 1 to 1½ inches in diameter. Pruners work best on the smallest branches. Use loppers on branches an inch or so in diameter.

Choose the Right Time
There isn’t a single best time for pruning. Late winter is an ideal time for pruning many trees and shrubs because they are dormant and it is easier to see what needs to be pruned. Late-winter pruning promotes fast regrowth in spring. There are exceptions.

Oaks and crabapples should be pruned in winter while they are dormant to keep diseases and insects from invading. Some trees, such as maples, birches, and magnolias, bleed sap heavily if pruned in late winter. This causes little harm but can be avoided by pruning these trees after they are fully leafed out in late spring or early summer.

Summer is the best time to remove dead branches when they stand out. Prune spring-flowering trees and shrubs right after they finish flowering in spring. Trees and shrubs that bloom during summer and into fall are best pruned in later winter or early spring as soon as their annual growth begins. Refrain from fall pruning because it stimulates new growth that could be killed by winter cold.

Prune anytime: suckers; water sprouts; branches that are dead, diseased, or damaged.

Make the Right Cuts
Holding the thinner, upper cutting blade nearer to the trunk or main stem, make a clean cut without tearing the bark. Avoid leaving a stub, which is unsightly and provides an entry point for pests and diseases. Cut just outside the branch collar, the swelling where the branch begins.
**PRUNING TREES**

Pruning is necessary at certain times in a tree’s life.

Pruning young trees encourages strong natural forms and leads to less work for you later in their lives. There’s no need to prune a newly planted tree unless it has damaged or dead branches. Give it a year to establish itself before pruning. Over the next few years, prune annually to remove poorly positioned branches (crossing or competing) and help the tree develop its ideal form.

Established trees need occasional pruning to remove dead branches. If the tree has been neglected, it may be necessary to control its size, reduce excess shade, or prevent branches from rubbing against each other, wires, buildings, or vehicles.

As a rule, cut no more than one-fourth of the tree’s branches in one year. If a tree needs extensive renovation, spread the task out over two or more years. Cutting more than 25 percent of any tree’s branches can compromise its viability.

**COMPETITIVE BRANCHES**

Sometimes parallel or sharply angled to a main branch, competing branches weaken a maturing tree.

**CROSSING BRANCHES**

Limbs that cross or rub may lead to decay or death. Leave the branch that best fits the overall structure.

**WATERSPROUTS**

These soft, fast-growing branches often rise from the trunk or large limbs, taxing the tree’s strength.

**SUCKERS**

Shoots from the trunk base or roots compromise the tree’s natural shape and drain its energy.
CUTTING LARGE BRANCHES

Big branches are best removed in steps to avoid damage to the tree—or to you.

Remove a branch too large to hold in one hand with three separate cuts, using a bow saw. Make the correct cuts using a three-step process instead of trying to do it in one cut, which can rip the bark from the tree. Also avoid leaving a stub, which will decay eventually and may become a harbor for pests.

The first cut should be made on the underside of the branch within 6 inches of the trunk. The second cut should be made on the top of the branch 2 to 3 inches from the initial cut. Make the third cut just outside the branch collar to remove the stub. Leave the branch collar; it contains chemicals that speed the formation of callous, healing the wound.

Let pruning wounds heal on their own. Applying tarlike wound dressings is no longer recommended. The treatment does not benefit the tree or speed healing in most cases.

Although it may take a number of years, some trees that have been pruned incorrectly can be improved. When you start to correct a poorly pruned tree, begin by looking for hidden decay in branch stubs. Prune stubs back to healthy wood.