

# Passionate About Proper Pruning

By Linda Roe

Early spring is the time of year when gardeners seem to feel the need to gather anything with sharp blades and go outside to “prune”. But wait! Before heading out and taking blade to branch know why and to what purpose.

There are many reasons to prune a plant (or not). Different methods of pruning depend on the type of plant and how it is used. All plants benefit from “3D” pruning and no special glasses are required. The 3 D’s are dead, diseased or damaged branches. These should always be pruned out for the health of the plant. Also, thin out branches that are rubbing against each other. This will prevent future damage. Once this is done, it may be all that is needed. Less is more, and some plants prefer to be left alone.

How next to proceed with pruning depends on the type of plant and the use in which it is put. Fruit bearing plants need the maximum amount of sun reaching the branches for best production of flowers and ripening of the fruit. That is why fruit trees are pruned to an open airy center with lots of horizontal branching. By contrast, a privacy hedge would need to be pruned in a different manner. Foliage will need to be dense and thick. Sunlight will still need to reach from top to bottom, so prune to a squared off or rounded pyramid shape.

Sometimes the reason to prune a plant will be to accent its beautiful, natural form. Take time with Japanese maples and so called cloud pruned pines. These plants should never look pruned, even after you just finished the job. Then again, some plants like to be “whacked back”. Butterfly bushes in particular respond well to this type of treatment. Plants that bloom on newer wood only look better after a good thinning. Remove old and unproductive branches and thin out some of the center suckers. Forsythia can become a graceful, fountain-like shrub by tackling this job after flowering in the spring. Know your plant and you will know how and why you are pruning, and why not. A shrub that is genetically programmed to be ten feet is not going to be happy kept at three feet under the living room window. Transplant it somewhere else or take a chainsaw to it and put it out of its misery! And NEVER top a tree!

We now know why we are going to prune, but is now a good time? This depends on the plant of course. Winter is the traditional time because most plants are dormant and the branch structure is easily seen. This is not a hard and fast rule, however. Trees susceptible to bacterial blight are better pruned in summer when the weather is dry. Roses prefer to be pruned in early spring when danger of a major temperature drop is past. Hedges are pruned when they are actively growing to promote dense branching. Flowering plants that set their flower buds in the previous summer, such as rhodies, are pruned right after flowering in the spring. Obviously you don’t want to prune off your flower buds!

The best way to learn how to prune is to get a good pair of nice, sharp pruners and a pruning book with lots of diagrams, and you may ask your friendly nursery professional. Then go out and “just do it”. You will make mistakes and you will learn. A few basic guidelines will help. When making a cut, always cut to the branch collar. This is the little ridge between the branch and the trunk or bigger branch. To promote branching, cut to a node or growth point and don’t leave a stub. Pruning paints and sealers are not necessary.

Now you have the knowledge to reserve your hedge trimmers for hedges and serious topiaries only. Your shrubs and trees don’t have to be boxes, poodle-balls or mushrooms they can have the beauty of their natural shape! Go outside and happy pruning.



Photo by Tom Roe