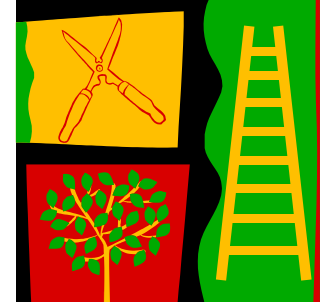


Do's and Don'ts of Pruning
by Terry Brite DelValle
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It's time to bring out the pruning saws and shears to whip those plants into shape before spring green-up. But before you start making those first cuts, it's important to understand when, why, and how to prune.



When to prune depends on the plant material and the desired response. Trees and shrubs can be pruned lightly any time. For heavy pruning, the best time to prune trees is late in the dormant season (now) or several weeks after a growth flush. The worst time to prune is when new leaves are forming or when trees are under stress.

Don't prune winter and spring flowering shrubs and trees now. A few shrubs to avoid pruning now include azaleas, some hydrangeas, camellias, spireas, Indian hawthorn, wisteria, pyracantha, feijoa, and gardenia. Also, don't prune trees such as redbud, dogwood, magnolias, fringe tree, and hollies. Wait to prune these after bloom but don't put this off too long. Dogwoods and azaleas form flower buds in July so June would be the last date to prune without affecting next years flower show.

Cold hardy summer and fall bloomers can be pruned now because flowers are formed on new growth. Examples of these shrubs and trees include glossy abelia, oleander, roses, American beauty berry, golden rain tree, crape myrtle, and loblolly bay.

Many fruit trees are deciduous (apples, peaches, pears) and are dormant during the winter. They should be pruned while dormant but only after the danger of severe freezes is past. Prune fruit trees now if there are problem areas (dead wood, crossing branches, suckers) that should be corrected and to create a strong tree structure to support the fruit load.

When pruning shrubs, timing is critical depending on the desired response. To encourage growth and bushiness, prune just prior to bud swell in the spring. However, most of us are pruning to control growth because plants have grown too large. To control or slow down growth, prune just after a growth flush when leaves have fully expanded. Roses should be pruned by February whether they are dormant or not. If leaves are still on the plant, strip off the old leaves to reduce future disease problems.

It's easier to select plant material that will grow to the desired height and avoid excessive pruning. But if the landscape hedges demand a more formal look, prune the top slightly narrower than the base. If the top is wider or both are the same, the top will shade lower branches and cause leaf drop. Diseases such as dieback or stem cankers may enter through fresh pruning cuts. Constant shearing, several times a year, to maintain shrub height will lead to branch dieback. If plants develop canker or dieback, the only control is to prune back into healthy wood to remove the disease. When pruning, always dip the

pruning shears into alcohol or some other disinfectant material between each pruning cut to prevent spreading diseases. Make a disinfectant solution by mixing a 25% solution of household bleach or pine oil cleaner (1 part ingredient to 3 parts water). Another option is to use a 50% solution of rubbing alcohol or denatured ethanol (1 part ingredient to 1 part water). Soak the tools for 5 minutes and rinse with water.

Ornamental grasses should be pruned before new growth emerges. For those that are dormant (straw color), cut close to the ground to remove dead leaves and flower stalks. Pull out brown material that is loose to allow space for new growth. If the grasses are evergreen, just trim off the brown tips and old flower stalks.

Tree pruning is always a challenge because people often don't know where to start. Pruning large trees can be a safety issue so if you can't prune a branch from the ground or a short ladder, hire a certified arborist. To find an arborist in your area, check the website www.arborist.com/home.aspx. Before employing an arborist, make sure they are insured and certified.

If you decide to tackle tree pruning yourself, follow these steps to make the job more manageable.

- First, remove any dead, diseased, crossing, or broken twigs and branches.
- Prune any watersprouts (strong upright shoots from a side branch) and suckers (shoots from the root system).
- Remove small branches at the center of the tree.
- Now comes the tough part. Train large maturing trees when they are young to one main trunk, also referred to as a central leader. The angle of a branch to the trunk should range from 45° to 90° to form a strong attachment to the trunk. Remove branches with V-shaped crotches less than 40° because they are more likely to split.
- If branches are 1/3 the size or larger than the main trunk (large maturing trees), remove or reduce the size of the competing branch. If you are pruning a large, mature tree with multiple trunks, contact a tree surgeon for their advice. It may be too late to correct this problem without damaging the tree.
- When removing a branch, do not make a cut flush with the trunk. Research shows that flush cuts cause extensive trunk decay. Instead, find the trunk collar which is a swollen area at the base of the branch. The trunk collar is part of the trunk wood so the cut should be made at an angle outside that area. This will leave a stub versus the traditional flush cut.
- When pruning, never remove more than 1/3 of the plant. Severe pruning leads to excessive regrowth and requires more follow up pruning.
- Don't use pruning paint. Pruning paint does not prevent decay and may cause more decay because of cracks that form allowing water to accumulate.

For more information on pruning, go to <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/MG087>.