

# PRUNING FOR HEALTH AND BEAUTY

Subtracting is adding with many trees and shrubs. Regular pruning keeps them healthy, manages their shape and size, and encourages flower and fruit development. The keys to successful pruning are knowing what, when, and how to cut to enhance the plant and avoid damaging it.

## What

Woody plants often grow unevenly as they mature and they can become overcrowded with branches. Start by cutting away those that are damaged, diseased, or dead. If a branch has no foliage during the growing season, it's likely dead.

Many species produce suckers, or shoots that come up from the roots or bottom of the main stem. Remove them so they don't direct more of the plant's energy into producing a new tree or shrub than goes into the existing one's growth.

The interior of woody plants can become a thicket of crossing branches that blocks air flow. Stagnant air is one of the contributing factors to fungal diseases, such as blackspot and powdery mildew. Cut back branches that are growing toward the center of the plant rather than away from the main stem.

Unless you are trying to create a topiary specimen or train a tree into espalier, woody plants look their best with their natural shape. Trim them sparingly and strategically to eliminate wayward limbs and maintain a balanced growth habit. Bear in mind that you can't turn a tall species into a short one by constant pruning. When choosing sites for trees and shrubs, consider their mature size.

## When

### Late Winter

Generally, the dormant season is the best time to prune shrubs and trees that bloom on new growth in spring, such as apples, crabapples, smooth and panicle hydrangeas, roses, and spirea. Prune maple, birch, and walnut trees before their sap begins to warm up and flow freely. If your evergreen trees and shrubs are overgrown, cut them back in late winter.

### Early Spring

Trim summer- and fall-flowering shrubs before their buds break and the plants leaf out. These include butterfly bush, rose of Sharon, and crape myrtle.

### Late Spring to Early Summer

Prune spring-blooming shrubs as they finish flowering. These plants bloom on old wood—they set next year's flower buds after blooming. If you prune these too early the plants will not bloom this year, and if you prune them too late there will be no flowers next year. Spring-blooming shrubs include azaleas, rhododendrons, forsythia, lilacs, and viburnums.



## How

When shortening a small branch or twig, make the cut about one-quarter inch above a bud, facing the outside of the plant so a new branch will grow in that direction.

Use three or four cuts on larger limbs to avoid tearing the bark. Starting about 18 inches from the trunk, make the first cut on the underside of the branch, cutting halfway through. Make a second cut an inch further out on top, cutting down until the branch breaks free. This reduces the weight of the branch before you make a third cut close to the trunk. After the bulk of the branch is gone, cut the remainder at the collar, where it meets the main trunk or stem. Be sure to remove only the wood beyond the collar. Leave the branch collar intact but with no stub to ensure the wound will seal effectively.

When pruning hedges of shrubs, try to trim the sides so the tops are narrower than the bases to allow the whole plant to get light. Overgrown shrubs such as forsythia and lilac may need renewal pruning; just: remove a third of the oldest stems or trunks right down to the ground to encourage the growth of new stems.

Studies have shown that pruning paints or sealers have little effect on how well woody plants heal after pruning.

## When Not To Prune

Pruning large established trees or any tree that's in a hazardous situation (*such as touching a utility line*) requires special equipment and training. Contact a certified arborist to handle those jobs. Do not cut off the tops of trees to make them shorter. Topped trees are vulnerable to internal decay that makes them more likely to break in strong winds.

## Basic Tools

**Hand pruners:** Tools that you use with one hand to make cuts are called pruners, and they are best for branches up to one-half inch in diameter. Use the bypass (scissor-style) type for making clean cuts on healthy plants and anvil-type pruners for trimming off dead branches.

## Lopping Shears

For branches one-half to 1-inch in diameter, you can use two-handed lopping shears. You may find models with a "ratchet," or gear mechanism that allows you to gradually increase the pressure as you cut through harder woods.

## Hedge Shears

These are designed for cutting off soft growth as you shape shrubs. You will find gas and electric models as well as the basic manual type.

## Bow and Pruning Saws

Use one of these large-toothed saws on limbs that are too thick for lopping shears. Bow saws give you leverage and pressure for slicing through hard wood. In spots where you can't maneuver a bow saw, a shorter pruning saw may be a better fit.

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[PHS McLean Library Tree Pruning Subject Guide](#)

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