



Simple Pruning Tips for a Great Looking Landscape



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Pruning is a word that often strikes fear in the heart of a new gardener faced with a yard of plants that need to be kept tidy. The truth is that pruning doesn't need to be complicated, and it can be very satisfying to see the results of a few snips of a pruner or shears.

When you prune, the goal is to refresh your landscape plants and give them a new lease on their lives! When first learning to give my plants a haircut I would dread the job because I would think that I really don't know what I'm doing. But as soon as I began working I could see the hidden beauty of the plant start to emerge and seeing such results made the job actually fun!

Many plants are best pruned in early spring before the new growth emerges. You can see the structure of a tree or shrub clearly and you don't have to fight through leaves to make a cut. New spring growth will come on shortly to fill in and to cover over the cuts you made, giving quick recovery and quick visible results. The exception to spring pruning is that if a plant blooms in spring then it's best to wait to prune until after bloom is done to prune so you don't cut off too many of your flowers. Fruit trees, however, are usually pruned in late winter or early spring because you want to open up the tree the sunlight and air, and a fruit tree has plenty of blooms further down the branches so you'll still get plenty of bloom and plenty of fruit.

You may have heard that you should not prune in summer or after a plant leafs. This is generally untrue. We prune the plants here at the nursery whenever they look like they would benefit.

Here are the reasons we prune and the best method for each:

Pruning can be done to shape, or to keep a plant within a certain size range, or to increase fullness. For these purposes you can use a manual or power hedge shear as long as the branches you're cutting through aren't too thick. Decide how large you'd like your plant to be once it sends out new growth and make your first cut on the top of your plant.... this will be your guide.



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If it's a round shrub then continue working around the shrub to make a ball or oval shape. If the shrub is to be a vase or other shape, visualize the ideal finished look and work over the entire shrub to make that a reality. The good thing is that, since a plant grows, it's unlikely that you'll make a permanent mistake. It will grow out and you can touch up later. A fast growing or larger leafed shrub will need to be trimmed more than you think since it will fill out with new growth amazingly fast! A slower growing or tiny leafed shrub may only need it's tips pruned to shape. After you've done the job once and then have the chance to observe how the plant responds to the haircut over the following weeks, you'll see clearly if you would like to make any changes to how you go about the job the next time around.

Pruning should be done to remove dead or diseased leaves or branches, or to remove older nonproductive stems or canes. Use pruners to cut a dead or unhealthy branch all the way down flush with the stem or limb it comes from, or all the way to the ground if that's where it originates. Larger branches or limbs will require a lopper or pruning saw. Don't leave a stub because it both leaves opportunity for disease to enter, and gives a place for new unwanted sprouts to develop.

Pruning can be done to touch up a plant and to make it more pleasing to look at or more appropriate for the space it's in. For this purpose, you would just want to cut back anything that looks scraggly to within the parameters given for the overall plant. For example, roses sometimes send out one cane that will grow much longer than the others on the bush. Simply cut that cane to just above a leaf, within the canopy of the plant. If an evergreen tree or shrub sends out a branch that doesn't fit with the overall structure of the plant, cut it to a natural spot that has enough needles or branching to obscure the cut. Make cuts a bit into the structure of the plant because it will send out new buds from behind the cut.



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If a tree has branches that cross one another or shoot straight up or down or grow back toward the trunk, they are best pruned off at their base, as described above. This opens it up to sunlight and air to promote healthy growth and also gives a more pleasing look. As a tree gains height you are likely to want to "limb it up" - take off lower limbs to give clearance to walk and mow underneath. This also allows more sunlight in for grass or other plants to grow more happily under it.

If a shrub has multiple stems coming from the base it will sometimes benefit from taking out the older stems to allow the younger ones to thrive. Red Twig Dogwoods, for example, will lose their bright red winter color in the older stems. If they are pruned out as they get thick and grey that gives room for more fresh young bright red stems to be able to grow. If the branches and leaves of a shrub are no looking old and "spent", you can take those out and you'll be amazed at the immediate look of health and vitality that will give the entire plant.

As your plants begin to leaf out in the spring you may notice that some of the branches only come back part way up. Roses are an example of a plant that will often do this.... a portion of their stems will turn brown and die over the winter. Cut these just above a healthy leaf or bud, taking off the dead grey portion.

Most herbaceous (non-woody) perennial plants die all the way back, and send out all new growth from their roots in the spring. If you leave these perennials in place over winter they will feed birds, add structure to the garden, and also add an extra layer of winter protection for the plant. In the spring you can cut or rake them to the ground to allow for clean new growth. Many people do this in the fall to get a tidier look. You can weigh the trade-off on this one!

Ornamental Grasses require cutting to a height of 1 to 3" in spring before new growth begins. Otherwise you'll get a mix of old brown dried blades and new colorful, airy blades that will obscure the beauty of the plant the entire season.



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You can also prune your annual flowers if you think they're getting shabby looking. If they have dead flowers you can clip or shear them off and you will get a new flush of fresh growth and with annuals, usually a new flush of bloom. That's called deadheading. You can do also give the whole plant a trim. taking off as much as 2/3 of the plant. The whole plant will renew itself. Often, when a plant is not looking real great any longer, you'll find that there are already new shoots coming from the base.

If you still have specific questions about how to prune a specific plant to solve a specific problem, you will most likely find whatever you're looking for by searching for an online video!

In summary:

Perennials: Early spring before new growth starts. Cut short to promote new growth if looking shabby. Some require deadheading to promote rebloom.

Shrubs: Prune anything dead, diseased, or growing out of bounds. Prune spring bloomers after bloom is done, or in the case of repeat bloomers, after the first flush of bloom is done. All others are best pruned before leafing in late winter or early spring. Thin older wood from large multi-caned shrubs when dormant. Pruning to tidy or refresh a plant can be done any time.

Ornamental grasses: Early spring before new growth starts.

Roses: As new spring growth begins. You can also prune them as blooms fade to promote fullness and a pleasing shape.

Bulbs: After they are done flowering, but wait for the leaves to start to dry out so they have a chance to provide food for the bulb to store for next season's bloom.

Annuals: Most benefit from deadheading throughout the season. Prune leggy annuals back to encourage better form.



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Trees: Eliminate low growing limbs as the tree gains height. When young, eliminate branches that grow straight up, down, toward the trunk, or cross another branch.

Fruit Trees: Basic rules are the same as for shade trees, except you can leave lower limbs so fruit can be reached easily and you can further dwarf a fruit tree by pruning off the central leader and encouraging lateral growth, which is also more productive. See Fruit Tree grow sheet for more info.

About Pruning Tools:

Scissors work well for pruning soft, thin stems, and for ornamental grasses..

Hand held pruners work well for more woody plants. Invest in a good pair that comes well recommended by gardeners and pros. You'll find they will last much longer and are easier on your hands.

Loppers are used to cut thicker branches. They are necessary for pruning trees and larger shrubs.

Hedge shears have long scissors type blades. You can also invest in a power hedge trimmer. A power trimmer is probably only advantageous if you have a lot of plants needing haircuts. Hedge shears also work well on ornamental grasses.. It is a necessary tool if you're wanting to keep a formal shape to your plants or if you need to limit the size of a number of plants with frequent haircuts.

A **pruning saw** is a curved saw with sharp teeth for pruning smaller limbs or hard-to-reach branches. You can get a pruning saw with telescoping handles or you can get just the saw.