

BASIC TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES OF PRUNING SHRUBS

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DECIDUOUS SHRUBS AT PLANTING

When shrubs are transplanted, pruning is sometimes necessary. Light pruning of roots or tops may be needed if they are broken, damaged or dead. Prune tops by the thinning-out method to reduce the overall height and width of the young plant by 10 to 25 percent.

Shrubs transplanted with a ball of soil (B & B or B & P) or from a container often will not require much pruning. Occasionally, branches may have been damaged in transit, and these should be removed at planting.

MATURE DECIDUOUS SHRUBS

Correct pruning is one of the most essential of all management practices for shrubs in the home landscape. Proper pruning will help keep shrubs vigorous, maintain them in proper shape and form for a desirable landscape effect, and add years to their usefulness.

Prune deciduous shrubs to maintain natural habit of growth; remove dead, diseased or broken branches; promote flower and fruit development; encourage vigorous growth of plants with colored twigs; and improve chances of survival at transplanting time.

With most shrubs, the ideal time to prune is during the dormant season before new growth begins. Spring flowering shrubs, such as forsythia and lilac, should be pruned shortly after flowering to avoid removing flower buds. Prune shrubs that bloom after the end of June in the winter or spring before new growth starts. These plants develop their flower buds during the spring growth period. Shrubs that bloom on current season's growth include rose-of-sharon and oakleaf hydrangea.

In general, most deciduous shrubs should be thinned out rather than sheared or cut back. Thinning out prevents excessive or unsightly branch formation at the top of the plant and maintains the natural habit of growth. Thinning is done by cutting off a branch where it is attached to the main stem. This method, the least conspicuous of all types of pruning, is best used on plants that are too dense. To develop branches that grow toward the outside of the plant, remove the inward growing branches and prune to an outward facing bud or branch.

Prune branches at the point of attachment to another branch or back to a bud. Pruning just above a bud prevents dieback of the stem, and a new branch will develop from the bud. Shearing causes dense growth to develop at the ends of the branches. Such growth shades the rest of the plant, which gradually loses its lower foliage and becomes sparse and spindly-looking.

You can maintain plants at a given height and width for years by thinning out. This method of pruning is best done with hand pruning shears, not hedge shears. Thin out the oldest and tallest stems first.

Older shrubs that have become too large or contain considerable unproductive wood should be rejuvenated. Prune the plant by cutting off the oldest branches at the ground, leaving only the young stems. If there are not many younger stems, remove the older wood over a three-year period to maintain the overall shape of the plant. New shoots that develop can be cut back to various lengths by the thinning-out method, which encourages the

development of strong branches. Plants that often become overgrown and benefit from rejuvenation include forsythia, honeysuckle, spiraea, viburnum, weigela, and other fast growing types. These plants, if extensively overgrown, severely weakened or otherwise unhealthy, can be cut back to the ground but may not bloom for one or several years, depending on the rate of regrowth.

NARROWLEAF EVERGREENS

Narrowleaf evergreens may be pruned during the winter when they are dormant. An ideal time is at Christmas so the trimmings may be used for decorations. The exception to this rule is pine, which should be pruned when the candle growth develops in the spring.

Prune evergreens according to their growth habits. Allow these plants to assume their natural shape. Do not shape them into balls, birds or other formal habits.

Pruning is a matter of cutting the branches to attain compact, controlled growth that results in a more desirable plant. This requires pruning individual stems rather than shearing. Shearing not only ruins the natural habit of growth, but the dense growth that results prevents light from penetrating the center of the plants, and the foliage there drops. It also makes insect and disease control difficult because spray materials cannot penetrate to the center of the plants. Certain pruning guidelines apply for various types of narrowleaf evergreens.

SPREADING NARROWLEAF EVERGREENS

Some yews and junipers have a spreading growth habit. The proper pruning procedure is to cut back enough to prevent spindly growth. A common problem results from needles dropping off the lower branches because of shading by upper branches. To prevent this, cut back the longer branches that develop on the top so the lower branches will be exposed to light.

It is best to cut back some each year to prevent the plant from getting out-of-bounds. It is not uncommon for a vigorous growing, spreading evergreen such as pfitzer juniper to produce 12 to 18 inches of growth or more each year. This should be reduced in sites where space is limited or even cut back into the previous year's wood to maintain the plant's size and shape. Reduce the height or width no more than 20 percent, however-the plant must have healthy, green foliage on the branches that remain to generate new growth. Spreading taxus - commonly called yews - may, if necessary, be cut back into two- or three- year-old wood. The cuts may be unsightly for one or two years, but new growth will eventually hide them.

UPRIGHT NARROWLEAF EVERGREENS

Hick's yew, canaert juniper, pine and spruce may be either narrow or pyramidal in shape. In the case of narrow, upright plants, such as Hick's yew, the previous year's growth should be cut back about one-quarter to one-half to encourage a thick growing plant. Pyramidal plants, such as spruce or pine, should be cut back a little on the sides to maintain or develop a more compact shape. The central leader of spruce or pine should not be cut at all except when the plants are young to remove a multiple leader. Remove all but the straightest and strongest growing stem. Upright forms of arborvitae require very little, if any, pruning.

When plants such as spruce or pine are young and growing vigorously, the top growing point may outdistance the rest of the plant. This results in an open space between the main body of the plant and the growing tip. To encourage the plant to branch and be more compact, cut the top back to a dormant bud located close to the main body of the plant. If this cutting back is done when plants are young, it will have little effect on the appearance of the plants.

Mature plants of tall growing narrowleaf evergreens - such as spruce, pine, upright arborvitae and some junipers - cannot be severely cut back or topped without damaging their shape. If one of these plants becomes too tall for the place it is growing, it may be necessary to remove the entire plant. Avoid this by properly selecting plants for the area. Hemlock may be allowed to grow in its natural pyramid shape or be cut back to form a hedge or screen.

ROUNDED NARROWLEAF EVERGREENS

Brown's yew and globe arborvitae are normally globe shaped and should not be sheared into balls. Brown's yew can be maintained at about any height and shape desired by pruning the previous year's growth to keep it bushy and compact. This means removing about one-quarter to one-half of last year's growth. Thinning of

individual branches, rather than shearing, will result in a more attractive, natural habit. In contrast to this plant, globe arborvitae requires little, if any, pruning because of its normal, formal habit of growth.

BROADLEAF EVERGREENS

One of the advantages of such broadleaf evergreens as rhododendron, holly, pieris and boxwood is that they require little, if any, pruning, except to remove dead or damaged branches or branches that detract from the shape of the plant. The most important practice is the removal of spent flowers. If this is done, plants will produce more growth and more flowers will form for the next year. A prime example of this type of pruning is on rhododendrons. Simply snap out the old flower cluster, being careful not to damage the developing young shoots immediately below the flowers.

Indiscriminately cutting off the fading flowers on all broadleaf plants will prevent the development of some beautiful fruit. Mahonia is a good example. If the flowers are cut off, no fruit will develop.

PRUNING HEDGES OR SCREEN PLANTS

To shape a hedge, begin pruning when plants are small and continue throughout the life of the plants. A hedge requires more pruning than other plants because a formal shape is desired.

In general, a hedge should be pruned so that it is broader at the base than at the top. Both deciduous and evergreen plants are used for hedges, and the methods of pruning vary somewhat.

DECIDUOUS HEDGES

Occasionally the lower part of a hedge consists of old, woody stems bare of leaves - all the leaves and flowers are produced at the tops of the plants. A spiraea, privet or forsythia hedge can be cut back to the ground in late winter. The new growth that develops can then be shaped as recommended.

Some plants used for a hedge, such as burning bush and viburnum, cannot be cut back this drastically but will tolerate a gradual cutback. Cut back one-third of the oldest woody stems to the ground. This will allow young growth to develop. Cut back the other growth one-third to one-half or more to encourage branching. If this is done over a period of two or three years, it will be possible to get the hedge in shape.

EVERGREEN HEDGES

Remember to prune to keep the base broader than the top. Pruning during the summer to remove feathery new growth is all that is usually required. Certain evergreens, such as yews, are more suited for growing as a hedge than others, so select plants carefully.

SCREEN PLANTS

Deciduous plants used for screening should be pruned as if they were individual specimen plants. Evergreens used as screens are generally the larger types, such as spruce, pine, arborvitae, hemlock and upright junipers. Most of these plants should be allowed to grow naturally and be pruned as described in the Upright Narrowleaf Evergreen section. Hemlock can then be sheared much the same as any other evergreen used as a hedge.

PRUNING GARDEN ROSES

Research at rose test gardens indicates that hybrid teas, floribundas, polyanthas and grandifloras pruned in March rather than in the fall tend to produce more flowers during the summer. Prune climbing roses immediately after flowering so you do not remove the flower buds for the following year.

Some fundamental pruning practices pertain to all garden roses. When you plant bare root roses, cut the tops back to 12 to 15 inches. (Frequently this has already been done before you buy them). Prune any broken or damaged roots. With potted roses, these two practices are generally taken care of before you buy the plants.

Because of the severity of northern winters, canes are frequently killed to the soil or mulch line. It is then a very simple practice to cut them back by removing all of this dead or damaged wood. Canes damaged on only one side should also be removed - the damaged area will affect the growth of new shoots.

Other rose pruning practices include removing any broken canes or canes damaged by insects or diseases, removing one of the two canes that criss-cross and may be rubbing, and removing canes that are spindly or smaller in diameter than a pencil. After pruning according to these general recommendations, cut hybrid teas, floribundas and grandifloras should be cut to a height of 18 to 24 inches.

Prune climbing roses in accordance with basic pruning practices. In addition, remove any very old, heavy canes growing in the center of the plant that are not producing many leaves or flowers. The newer canes will produce more growth and flowers. The canes may become quite long, so it will be necessary to prune them back to keep the plant confined to the allotted area. Climbing roses bloom on the previous year's wood. If the previous year's wood is removed, they will produce no flowers. When planting a climber, allow enough space for its growth or be prepared for continual pruning.