

PROPER PRUNING TECHNIQUES HELP KEEP PLANTS HEALTHY

By Larry Lennert

The grass is always greener on the other side, and sometimes, the trees and shrubs on the other side look a lot nicer too.

You can help improve the health and attractiveness of the trees and shrubs on your course by timely and proper pruning.

There are many different reasons to prune. Control of plant size, increasing vigor and density, increasing flower and fruit production, and formalizing plants such as hedges can all be achieved with proper pruning.

However, one of the most important reasons to prune is often overlooked. Physical flaws of plants should be corrected as soon as possible. Try to remove all dead and diseased branches. They are unattractive and may allow decay organisms to move into the trunk or main branches. Remove conflicting branches, like double leaders and crossing limbs on trees and shrubs. Crossing branches may rub together and damage the bark, opening pathways for insects and diseases. Remove water sprouts from trees and suckers from the root stocks of grafted plants. They ruin attractive branching patterns and the plant wastes valuable energy to produce this ugly growth.

While there are many different reasons to prune, there is one basic rule of pruning you should always follow. Cut back to a bud, side branch or trunk and never leave a stub. Make your cut about one quarter of an inch above and slanting away from the bud. If you leave a much larger stub, there is a good chance decay will begin and damage the plant. Cutting too



close to the bud will cause it to dry out and die.

Although this basic rule of pruning applies to almost all trees and shrubs, there are some special pruning techniques that are used, especially for certain plant types.

The removal of large branches from trees is a three-step process.

First, make an undercut halfway through the branch, several inches from the trunk.

Next, make a cut from top to bottom about two feet from the trunk and drop the branch, removing the major weight.

Finally, make a smooth, flush cut from top to bottom, removing the remainder of the branch.

There is one precaution, however.

Don't cut through the branch collar. The branch "collar" is the enlarged area where the branch attaches to the trunk. Cutting through the branch collar needlessly increases the size of the pruning wound.

In the past, wound dressings were commonly applied to pruning wounds. That has changed.

Tree wound dressings are no longer recommended. Research has shown they are generally ineffective in preventing decay. In fact, heavy applications of wound dressings may actually trap moisture and encourage decay. However, the bare wood of large pruning wounds is often an eye sore and needs to be covered. Use a thin coat of tree paint to cover the wound. This should hide the wound and still allow moisture to escape.

One exception to this non-wound dressing rule is red and black oaks. They are susceptible to oak wilt, a serious disease. The insect that transmits the disease is attracted to the sap that flows from open wounds, so apply a wound dressing to these trees if

they are pruned during the growing season.

Renewal pruning is another special technique used for pruning deciduous shrubs (shrubs that lose their leaves each fall). Renewal pruning is the selective removal of the oldest, heaviest canes at the ground line. This technique is used to maintain the size, form and vigor of deciduous shrubs. When you make a cut at the ground line you stimulate buds which develop into new shoots.

Renewal pruning can also be used to rejuvenate old, "leggy" and overgrown shrubs. Remove one third of the oldest, heaviest canes each year for three consecutive years.

Just as important as "why" and "how" to prune, is "when" to prune.

The best time to prune most trees and shrubs is near the end of the dormant season. Pruning wounds heal most quickly in the spring and it's also easier to see what you are doing because the leaves are absent.

There are again, however, a few exceptions.

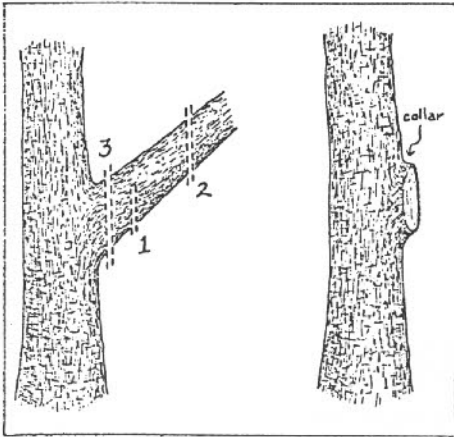
You may want to prune spring flowering shrubs after they bloom so you don't remove any potential flowers. Also, many spring flowering shrubs bloom only on wood from the previous year's growth. Pruning in spring after the bloom gives the plant an entire growing season to produce new wood for next year's bloom.

Most evergreens require little or no pruning but it usually is desirable to limit the size and increase the density of the dwarf mugo pines. Prune these pines in late spring when the new developing buds are in the "candle" stage. Snap off a portion of the candle with your fingers. The buds at the bases of the remaining new needle fascicles will develop into lateral shoots.

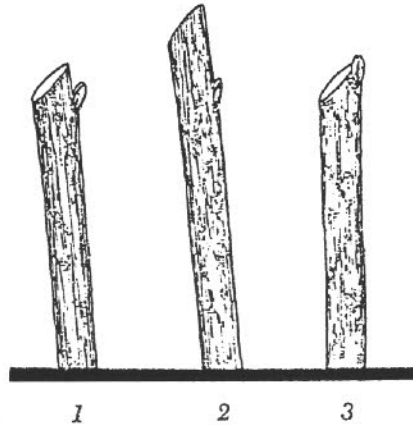
Some trees will bleed sap if they are pruned during the dormant season. Some of these trees include maples, birches and elms. The loss of sap doesn't hurt these trees, but it may be unattractive. You can eliminate this problem by pruning these trees during the growing season.

While there are best times to prune, pruning may be done at any time if necessary.

So remember the old saying,
"Prune when the saw is sharp!"



The three step process for removing large branches from trees. 1. Make an undercut halfway through the branch, several inches from the trunk. 2. Make a cut from top to bottom about two feet from the trunk. 3. Make a smooth, flush cut from top to bottom, removing the remainder of the branch. Don't cut through the branch collar.



A good pruning cut and two poor pruning cuts. 1. A good pruning cut is about one quarter of an inch above, and slanting away from the bud. 2. A bad pruning cut leaves a large stub. The stub may decay and spread down the branch. 3. A bad pruning cut too close to the bud. Water evaporates from the cut and the bud may dry out and die.

Editor's Note: It is with pleasure that we introduce another regular feature of THE GRASSROOTS. All of our future issues will have some advice and recommendations concerning "The Other Plants" found on our golf courses. So much of our time, interest and budget are spent on turfgrasses that many of us occasionally neglect the many other landscape plants important to the complete golf course. The author of "The Other Plants" is Larry Lennert. Larry is the Assistant Golf Course Superintendent at North Shore Golf Club in Menasha. He is a 1985 graduate of the University of Wisconsin—Madison and earned degrees in Soil Science (with a specialization in Turf and Grounds Management) and in Horticulture (with a specialization in Ornamental Horticulture). He is particularly qualified to write these columns in a golf course journal because of his interest, knowledge and experience with the very plants this column will look at.

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