

Pruning – Why, When and How

WHY

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Pruning is an integral part of the maintenance of any landscape site. Correct pruning helps maintain vigorous plants and can aid the supply of additional energy for development of flowers, fruit and limbs.

Pruning is most generally conducted to control the size of plants and to bring overgrown plants back into bounds. Extreme or radical pruning to control size can be eliminated by correct plant selection. Choose plants that "fit" the landscape purpose. Don't try to make a large growing plant fill the need by extensive annual pruning.

Pruning aids the survival chances of newly planted trees and shrubs by compensating for reduced root systems. The tops of bare-root plants should be pruned back 1/3 to 1/2. Balled-and-burlapped and container-grown material require less severe thinning but still may require some reduction of the leaf surface.

Pruning aids in maintaining the health and appearance of the plant. Minor insect and disease infestations can often be controlled by removing the affected portions. Damaged and dead wood should also be removed.

Future flower and fruit development can often be stimulated by correct pruning. Removal of shrivelled and faded flowers and fruit allows more available carbohydrates for development of next season's buds.

Personal and property damage can be reduced or avoided by removal of lower hanging and dangerous limbs. Other maintenance procedures, such as mowing or spraying can also be speeded or aided by removing low limbs.

WHEN

Timing is one of the most important factors in correct pruning and is usually based on the flowering and fruiting habit of the plant. Trees and shrubs that bloom before the end of June produce flower buds on the previous season's growth. Plants, such as Magnolia sp. and Forsythia sp., should be pruned immediately after flowering. Plants that flower after the end of June, such as Buddleia sp. (Butterflybush) and Hibiscus syriacus (shrub althea), form flower buds on the current season's growth. These species should be pruned in the winter or early spring. Plants valued for their fruit should be pruned in the winter or early spring after the fruit drops. A maintenance schedule which divides plants into pruning groups based on flowering or fruiting will aid the operation and reduce confusion.

Everygreens, both broadleafed and narrowleafed, can be pruned any time the wood is not frozen. Pruning of most conifers every two or three years is essential for size control, since new growth seldom arises from older wood. The shoots of coniferous evergreens, such as Pinus sp. (pine) can be pinched back in the spring to thicken these plants. Pinch the candle back about half way when the new needles are about 1/4 inch long.

Most shade trees should be trained while young. Establish alternate branching and remove weak branch angles or crotches to prevent problems in later years. Shade trees are generally pruned in late winter or early spring. Some trees, such as Ulmus sp. (elm), Betula sp. (birch), Cornus sp. (dogwood), Acer sp. (maple) and Cladastrus lutea (yellowwood) are known as "bleeders". These plants may be best pruned in summer or fall. The sap dripping from spring wounds will not harm the plant, but may be objectionable to clients. Late summer pruning should be avoided. New growth may be encouraged and will not be sufficiently hardened to prevent winter damage.

CONTINUED NEXT MONTH