

Winter Pruning is Ideal for Most Plants

by Paul J. Pugliese

Winter doesn't offer a total break from garden chores. Late winter, just before spring green-up begins, is actually prime time to prune most plants, if they need to be pruned. The great thing about trees and shrubs is that they can be quite resilient to past mistakes (and forgiving) when it comes to pruning. Pruning in the winter is the time to correct those past mistakes and keep your plants healthy and shapely. The keys to proper pruning are using the right timing, technique, and tools.

Timing: In Cherokee County, mid-February is the best time to reshape and rejuvenate most of your summer-blooming plants and plants that bloom on new wood growth such as crape myrtles, nandinas, shrub roses, glossy abelias, butterfly bushes, and plants that aren't known for their flowering, such as hollies and other evergreens. Any dead wood or diseased limbs can be cut out any time of the year including now.

Pruning out diseased or dead wood is necessary to keep your plants healthy and helps reduce the spread and

severity of plant diseases. Many trees and shrubs become overgrown and no longer fit the space they were originally intended to fill.

You can either reclaim that space with yearly pruning or move the plant to a new location so that it can grow to its natural size. This is still a good time of the year to transplant, although the plant may require more water this summer than if it were transplanted in the fall (the ideal time to transplant). One way to reclaim severely overgrown shrubs is called rejuvenation or renewal pruning. This requires cutting the main stems back to about 8" inches above the ground. This works well for many varieties of plants. However, you should never do this kind of severe pruning on conifers, boxwoods, or to plants you want to bloom this season.

The only exception to pruning in winter is for plants that flower from buds set on the previous year's old

wood growth. You can still prune these plants in winter, which is the best time for all major pruning jobs, but you shouldn't expect any flowers for at least a year. Examples of plants that bloom on old wood include forsythias, dogwoods, camellias, viburnums, azaleas and other rhododendrons. If you want to have flowers this year and next year, prune these plants immediately after they finish flowering.

Techniques: Knowing how to prune is just as important as knowing when to prune. You should never shear, top-off, or hedge trees and shrubs unless you are trying to go for that meatball-shaped décor. The best method, called thinning, is to carefully select whole branches to remove that will reshape the plant to the form you want. When you selectively remove branches, be sure to cut down to a main branch or the nearest bud.

Thinning out select branches allows more light and air inside the plant's canopy, which will help reduce disease and insect problems. When you make your pruning cuts, take note of the direction that the nearest bud is facing to your final cut. The direction of this bud will determine whether the plant grows outward or inward, which depends on whether you want the plant to fill-out or fill-in a space. You should always prune shrubs so that the bottom of the plant is larger than the top so that the plant will not shade-out the lower branches. Don't use pruning paints; they're unnecessary and may actually slow the cuts' healing. Make your cuts at a slant, too, and a fraction above the bud. The slant will allow water to roll off the newly cut surface and prevent rotting and decay from moisture.

Tools: Hand pruners are your most essential pruning tool. Avoid using gas-powered trimmers when doing major corrective pruning and reshaping jobs. The by-pass cut or scissor-type pruners are the most useful. The anvil-type, hand pruners aren't as good, since they tend to crush limbs rather than cut them. Use lopping shears to prune small trees or shrubs like crape myrtles with diameters up to 1.5 inches. For plants with branches more than 2 inches thick, use a pruning saw.

If you are pruning plants that you know may be diseased, then consider sterilizing the pruning blades with a 10% bleach solution, especially between individual plants. This will minimize spreading any potential diseases from plant to plant.

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