

Can I Prune Now?

There are always questions here about pruning deciduous trees. The rule of thumb to prune when trees are dormant, leads many to grab loppers, saws, and clippers as soon as the leaves are off the trees. Fall is probably best only for taking out dead or dying branches. The cooling temperatures slow down the healing process and leaves pruning cuts or wounds that may be more subject to freezing temperatures.

Bear in mind that the answer to most questions is that it depends. Pruning decisions depend on many things including the age of the tree. Winter pruning is handled much better by larger, more mature trees than young thin-barked ones. I also caution folks as they head out to prune, that in the case of most hardwood trees that they may not need to prune at all. With most hardwood trees in the landscape, pruning can and usually destroys the natural shape of the tree. The worst example of this is a tree that is topped out. While in some instances this practice is necessary to prevent damage of property in the case of a tree that has potential for falling, one must admit that these old trees never seem to regain their natural canopy shape.

Most trees and tree experts prefer late winter for pruning most deciduous plants. Pruning late leaves open wounds just before spring growth begins when it's easier for nature to make needed repairs. When I get questions about pruning later in the spring, I hesitate to give the go-ahead because well established, healthy trees may handle it with no problems, but I don't like to chance it. There are insects that can bring diseases into pruning wounds during warm weather.

Late winter also can be a good time to prune deciduous shrubs, especially those that do not flower and those that flower in summer or fall. Because it allows healing time before summer's weather extremes hit, it also can be a good choice for renovating or otherwise severely pruning spring-flowering shrubs (which then will have reduced or no blooms for the year). While I've touched on pruning flowering shrubs, the old tried and true rule of thumb has stood the test of time. Prune flowering shrubs just after they have finished flowering. One exception to this, I'll add in because of their popularity, is the shrub type rose such as the Knock Out series. You'll want to prune these as soon as the danger of frost is past in the spring, which for us, will likely be in April.

Finally, what if you get behind and prune a little late and the plant bleeds? Won't that kill them? I get this often with muscadine owners, but there are other plants that will exude large quantities of sap. I don't encourage waiting on these type plants, but the bleeding will not kill the plant. The sap may attract insects because of the sugar content and molds may grow on it, in time, but the experts remind us not to worry.

So if you were headed out over the holidays thinking you had to get the pruning done, you and your plants may be better off if you go back in and warm up by the fire.