

Pruning Ornamental Woody Plants

The act of pruning is different for different plants and at different times of the year.

The best *time* to prune a particular plant depends on things like: how fast it grows, when it flowers and/or fruits, how crowded its branches are (considering its habit), and if diseased or damaged.

The best *way* to prune a particular plant depends on things like: habit, age, health, and, if you are pruning for ornamental value, your intent for its shape.

The following are the most basic things we need to know about pruning ornamental woody plants.

How woody plants grow

A Principle Called: Apical Dominance

- Controls bud growth.
- Controls overall growth habit of entire plant.
- Uses Auxin & Sucrose (sugar) to force new growth longer and stronger out their shoot tips.
- When terminal bud(s) are removed, dormant buds farther down the branch are activated (made to sprout) because:
 - 1) Auxin is transferred from the old apex bud into the dormant bud closest below the pruning cut; and
 - 2) Sugars from the foliage near the cut supply nourishment the dormant buds.

By 'Breaking Bud'

- When dormant flower or leaf buds suddenly grow it is called 'breaking bud'. Plants do this usually in springtime.
- Some plants (mostly conifers) have trouble breaking bud on 'old' wood (that which is more than one year old). Pruning such plants should be confined mostly to new growth unless we are removing damaged, diseased, or dead branches.
- Plants that flower in early spring or summer, do so *old* wood (before the new stems grow in springtime). → Prune immediately after they flower.
- Plants that flower in later summer or fall, do so

on *new* wood (after the new stems grow in spring). → Prune in late winter or early spring.

Why we prune

- To fix or avoid problems caused by awkward, diseased, dead or damaged growth. Pay attention to:
 - 1) Dead / Damaged / Diseased Wood or Tissue
 - 2) Narrow Crotch Angles
 - 3) Close / Crowded / Crossing Branches
 - 4) Suckers / Watersprouts
- Appearance — This is a reason to prune, but it should be a lesser important reason for pruning. The plant's (and our) health and safety are always more important than the plant's overall beauty.

When we prune

By Season

Late Winter / Early Spring (Feb - Apr)

- Causes MORE growth once the growth does start in spring or summer.
- Dormant pruning reduces buds, thus causing larger blooms or fruit the following season.
- Good time to prune young plants, and plants in need of radical renovation.

Late Spring / Early Summer (May - Jly)

- Doesn't really affect speed of regrowth.
- Good for neglected plants and many fruit trees.
- Good time to fix shaping issues, deadhead spent spring blooms, and snap off suckers and water sprouts.

Late Summer / Early Fall (Aug - Oct)

- Causes LESS growth the next growing season because removal of foliage lets less sugar be returned to root system for storage over winter.
- Causes a dwarfing effect.
- Good time to prune watersprouts and suckers, but over-pruning of this growth problem can cause the plant to produce much more.

Late Fall / Early Winter (Nov - Jan)

- **Don't prune at this time of the year** unless plant is diseased, damaged or dangerous.

In general, do not prune when these conditions coincide:

- Temperature is much over 75°F
- Sunny
- Rain not predicted for the next day or 2.

By Flowering Time

- Spring flowers generally come from buds set the previous summer, on *old wood*. → Prune after the flowers bloom.
- Summer flowers generally come from buds formed during the current growing season (as in after winter), on *new wood*. → Prune in late winter or early spring. This generally produces more branches on which there are more flower buds.
- Winter flowers generally come from buds set the previous summer, on *old wood*. → Prune after flowers bloom.

What we prune with

Clean and sharp by-pass hand pruners, loppers, hand saws.

When pruning diseased or dead wood, sterilize tools with bleach or disinfectant between cuts to prevent or spread disease.

How we prune

Heading Cut — For reduction of overall size.

Non-selective Heading

- Topping, Shearing — Produces rampant, uncontrolled growth requiring constant repeated topping or shearing.
- Coppicing, Pollarding — Two very acceptable ornamental pruning practices, but still require constant repeated pruning.

Selective Heading

- Removes the larger 'parent' stem of a branch back to a smaller side branch, one *at least* half the parent stem's diameter. Leaves the plant fairly natural looking.
- Often called 'drop-crotching' or 'crown reduction', this type of pruning is better than 'topping', but still can be hard on the plant.
- Better to decide if a tree or shrub is going to be too large for your landscape **at the nursery** by reading the tag to see how large it will be when it's all grown up.

Thinning Cut — For reducing bulk.

- Removes smaller 'side' stems from a branch back to the main parent branch, leaving the parent branch intact.
- Similar to selective heading, producing a natural overall shape, but generally easier on the plant.
- Removing lower-to-the-ground branches is called 'skirting', 'crown raising' or 'limbing up'. Better solution for reducing shade than 'crown reduction'.

Thirds — How much to remove.

- Don't remove more than 1/4 – 1/3 of the entire foliar mass of the plant in one calendar year. This is why many pruning techniques, particularly renovation pruning, refer to pruning in 'thirds'.

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by Beth Goodnight, Landscape Designer & Gardening Coach
Goodnight Design • <http://goodnightdesign.com>

Questions? Schedule an appointment?

Contact: SuccessfulLandscaping@gmail.com

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Guide to Pruning

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