

# Garden Talk

## Pruning Basics

In a well-planned, well-pruned garden, you're rarely aware of pruning. Trees and shrubs grow in proportion to each other, complementing your home and other structures rather than overwhelming them. In fact, most people notice pruning only when it's done badly.

If you choose the right plant for the right location and give it plenty of room to expand, you probably won't need to prune often. You may have to cut back a few stems or branches now and then as the plant matures, but pruning won't be a major task.

Proper pruning will maintain your safety from branches that block views down the driveway, or heavy branches that can crack and crash to the ground. Proper pruning also rejuvenates plant growth, directs the growth of new spring shoots, removes undesirable growth and promote better plants health. Proper pruning of fruiting plants increases fruit production and enhances the shape and look of landscape plants.

Many plants, especially deciduous trees and shrubs, are best pruned in late winter through early spring, just before they break dormancy. Heavy frosts have abated, so the plants are less likely to suffer cold damage at the point where you make the cuts. Sugars are still stored in larger branches, trunks, and roots, so little food will be lost to pruning. Deciduous plants are still bare, so you can easily spot broken and awkwardly growing branches and decide how to direct growth. And because growth will soon start, your pruning cuts will stimulate new growth in the direction you want.

**Start pruning** by remove stakes and guy wires installed on trees planted last spring and fall. Allowing a little

swaying of tree stems results in sturdy yet resilient plants. Pruning will improve air circulation and penetration of sunlight, which in turn can reduce the incidence of disease. Trees prone to diseases like shot hole, powdery mildew and leaf spot will all benefit from this technique.

**Prune out dead or damaged branches** and twigs of trees and shrubs. Here's how you tell if a branch is dead or alive even without leaves on them. Use your thumbnail or knife to scrape a little bark off the branch.

If the color of the wood under the bark is green, that branch is alive and viable. If the color of the wood under the bark is white, it is in question; if brown that branch is dead. Prune all dead branches out first.

**Second, prune** out branches that are growing back into the middle of the tree or crossing other major branches. This should open up the middle and allow more air and sun into the structure of the plant. How high should I prune my trees is often asked of me. I am 6'2" and don't like to stoop under my trees during cleanup, so my

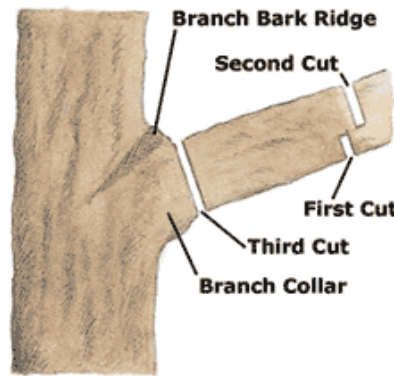
trees are pruned up off the ground this high. Prune up trees to the height that is comfortable to you, and looks balanced in the yard.

I prune branches that are growing down towards the ground instead of out, or in the direction I want them to grow. Cut these back to the trunk, branch or new shoot that is heading in the direction you want. Cuts should be at an angle even with the branch collar. This will encourage the bark to repair and grow over the cut faster.



Don't prune early spring bloomers until after the flowers of spring have dropped, this is for your benefit more than the plants. Why not enjoy the flowers first, then prune? Spring bloomers such as forsythia, lilac, quince, azalea and rhododendrons have been using all their energies to form flower buds through winter. Prune them early and these flower buds will be lost with no time to reform new flowers by Spring. Wait to prune spring bloomers until after the blooms fade.

When removing heavy branches, avoid ripping the bark by shortening the branch to a stub before cutting it off at the branch collar. Use a sharp pruning saw and make these three cuts as described below:



1. About a foot from the branch collar, make a cut from the underside approximately a third of the way through.
2. About an inch further out on the branch, cut through the top until the branch rips off. The branch should split cleanly between the two cuts.
3. Make the final cut by placing the saw beside the branch bark ridge and cutting downward just outside the branch collar. (If the branch angle is very narrow, cut upward from the bottom to avoid cutting into the branch collar.)

Although evergreen trees and shrubs don't drop their leaves, they approach a near dormant state during the winter months. This group includes broadleaf evergreens such as boxwood and red tipped photinia, and conifers like spruce and pine. Broad leaf evergreens are usually best pruned in late dormancy or in summer.

Most conifers are pruned only in their first two or three years in order to direct their basic shape. Some of the most

badly botched pruning you'll see is on conifers that have been pruned too severely, usually to keep them confined to a small location. A few conifers including arborvitae, yew, and juniper lend themselves to shearing into hedges. When you do need to prune a conifer, the timing will depend on whether the plant has a central leader or random branching.

Varieties with a central leader structure include fir, spruce, and pine. These trees produce all their new growth in spring; buds appear at the tips of new shoots as well as along their length and at their bases.

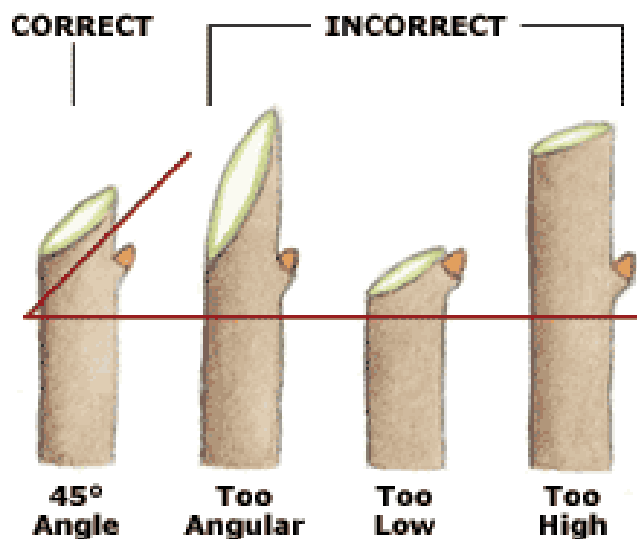
Prune these conifers in early spring. Induce thicker branching by cutting anywhere along the new growth for spring, being sure to do so before the

shoots harden. When the tree is still relatively small, you can nip back the plants new growth of the main leader on top and all side branches to make a denser, bushier plant. If you cut into an older stem however, even at a point where it bears foliage, no new growth will sprout from below the cut.

Evergreens with random branching don't limit their new growth to spring, but grow in spurts throughout the growing season. Trees of this type include cedar, cypress, yews, redwood and junipers. Prune these as you would deciduous and broad leafed evergreens. New growth will sprout from below the pruning cuts as long

as the remaining branch bears some foliage. Generally new growth will not sprout from bare branches. It's best to prune random branching conifers right before new growth begins in spring.

Correct pruning cuts should be at an angle about 45°, with the lowest point of the cut opposite the bud and even with it; the highest point about 1/4 inch above the bud.



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