

Why, How and When to Prune Trees and Shrubs

By Kate O'Lenic, Master Gardener

Speaking of trees, **Take Note! Tennessee Tree Day is March 16, 2024. To reserve your trees now through March 4th, go to: <https://www.tectn.org/tennesseetreeday.html>. The trees go fast, so reserve now.**

Pruning is both a science and an art. It may seem challenging, but there are plenty of resources to help you do a good job. Here are some highlights to get you started.

Trees and shrubs benefit from proper pruning in many ways. Fruit trees can produce more fruit, decorative flowering trees and shrubs can produce more flowers. Better light penetration and air circulation can result in healthier plants. A more pleasing shape can be achieved with pruning as long as the natural shape of the plant is not altered. Trees and shrubs that are overgrown need to be pruned. Plants damaged from disease or hard freezes generally benefit from pruning. These are some of the “whys”.

Just as importantly are the “hows”. Improper and over-pruning or pruning at the wrong time or the wrong plant can actually do harm. Improper technique or the wrong tools could cause a reduction of flowering, leave plants more susceptible to insect damage or disease or even damage from a hard freeze.

One part of the “how” is the right tool to do what is needed. Make sure the tools are clean and sanitized. Hand pruners, shears, and loppers are most commonly used by the home gardeners. Which you use depends on what you are pruning. Hand pruners are great for cutting twigs and branches up to ½ inch in diameter. For branches ½ to 1-1/2 inch in diameter, loppers are the right choice. Larger branches will require a pruning saw and may require several cuts to get the limb to the desired length.

Another part of “how” is the angle used to cut the limb. A slight angle (about 45 degrees) made ¼ inch above a bud helps water run off the cut area. Wider angles make larger wounds and should be avoided. See the resources at the end of this article for in-depth information about how to prune. Also, it is unnecessary to use a wound covering on the cut area. These types of products can promote rotting. Let the plants heal naturally.

How do you know which are the right branches to remove or trim? Diseased or damaged limbs are clear choices. Step back from the tree or shrub to get an idea of its natural shape. What can be done to enhance it? Look at the spacing of branches. Remove a branch that is too close to another or crosses over or touches another branch. Be careful to avoid nicking the other branch. Remove the small suckers that pop up at the base of the plant and “water sprouts” that grow on the top side of horizontal limbs. If a tree needs a lot of work because of neglect, spread the pruning out over several years, taking more than 20 to 30% off at a time can severely reduce the plant’s ability to produce enough nutrients to grow and remain healthy. It could also stimulate the roots to produce a lot of suckers to make up for the lost limbs.

Next, let's discuss when and what to prune. Timing is everything to get the best results from pruning. Deciduous trees are best pruned when they are dormant - January through early March. That includes summer-blooming ornamentals, fruit, and nut trees. Spring-blooming ornamentals should be pruned AFTER flowering. Otherwise, you could greatly diminish the flowers produced. Some trees don't even need to be pruned. For example, magnolias, hollies, pines, firs, and cedars do not necessarily require pruning to thin or shape them.

A quick word about Crape MURDER. Don't do it! Some folks out there still promote this terrible practice. However, crape myrtles should be treated the same as any other flowering shrub. Spent flower heads can stay. In fact, you may not need to do any pruning. See the article and video from the University of Georgia for the proper way to treat these shrubs. <https://extension.msstate.edu/southern-gardening/video/2018/crape-murder> There is also a great article from the University of North Carolina: <https://burke.ces.ncsu.edu/2016/01/crepe-murder-revisited/>.

There's a lot to pruning properly. The resources at below will help you learn more about the science and art to do a great job.

How do I ask a question?

If you have a question for the Master Gardeners, submit them to us on our website at www.netmga.net. Click the link at the top of the page, "ASK A MASTER GARDENER" to send in your question. Questions that are not answered in this column will receive a response from a Master Gardener to the contact information you provide.

Resources

"Principles & Practices for Pruning" Factsheet | HGIC 1003, <https://hgic.clemson.edu/factsheet/pruning-trees/>.

"Basic Principles of Pruning Woody Plants," <https://extension.uga.edu/publications/detail.html?number=b949>.

"Pruning Ornamental Trees and Shrubs," <https://www.extension.purdue.edu/extmedia/HO/HO-4-W.pdf>.

"How to Prune Fruit Trees for Healthier Trees and Better Harvests," <https://extension.illinois.edu/blogs/good-growing/2021-01-21-how-prune-fruit-trees-healthier-trees-and-better-harvests>.

"Fruit Trees and Nuts," <https://content.ces.ncsu.edu/extension-gardener-handbook/15-tree-fruit-and-nuts>.