

Extreme Tree and Shrub Pruning (published 2025-11-22)
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Proper pruning is something we've talked about before. But what about extreme pruning? That's a term I made up, but when you read the examples in this article, you might agree that it's appropriate.

Bonsai is the fine art of pruning just right to keep what would be a normal-sized tree tiny. It requires pruning roots and limbs, the use of wire to train branches, and a ton of patience, not to mention talent. In every respect, it is an extreme way to miniaturize a tree or shrub.

Topiary is another art form that transforms humble shrubs or other plants into geometric forms, animal shapes, and whatever someone with a whimsical imagination conjures up. And topiaries can be created with indoor plants as well as shrubs. Most topiaries start with a wire frame. Then the plants are trained to cover the frame. It can take 3 to 10 years to achieve the finished project. Yews and holly are often used for outdoor topiaries for their evergreen nature and adaptability to pruning.

Now, let's get into more unusual extreme pruning techniques. Espalier is a method of training a flowering shrub or fruit tree to grow flat along a wall, trellis, fence, or between posts. The plant has height and width, but little depth. It is a great space-saving practice for small or narrow gardens. It is certainly eye-catching, and for fruit trees, harvesting is very easy. Apple and pear trees are often grown in this manner, as are climbing roses.

Here's a new term (at least to me) of extreme pruning: pleaching. It is a way of creating a fence or archway by weaving branches of trees together and pruning regularly to maintain the form. It is time-consuming to keep limbs trimmed to shape, but it makes quite a statement.

Coppicing is considered a severe form of corrective pruning for badly deformed trees. It is more successful for small trees with a trunk no more than 2 to 6 inches in diameter. The sad-looking tree is cut completely off near ground level. Sprouts that grow from the stump are monitored for 2 to 3 years, and the best one is allowed to grow, while the others are removed. This technique seems to work for hardwoods like oak, but is not used for conifers.

The US Forest Service defines pollarding as "... the practice of pruning trees annually to remove all new growth...." It is a means of unnaturally controlling the size of a tree, often for aesthetic reasons or the selection of a tree too large for the space. There are many examples in my neighborhood of trees that have been severely pruned, akin to pollarding. However, new growth is not removed every year. Historically, pollarding was done to provide fuelwood or fodder for animals. It is quite an extreme and expensive measure, as an experienced tree removal service or arborist is needed to do this correctly.

Topping is a very bad way to treat a tree. It is defined as the excessive and arbitrary removal of all limbs above a certain level, much like crape “murder”. Several of my neighbors have had tall pines topped. They look awful, and this practice is quite harmful to trees. Aside from the tree being disfigured, its ability to survive is altered. Removing too much of a tree reduces photosynthesis. In essence, the tree begins to starve. Branches larger than 2 inches in diameter are slow to heal or may not heal, which can lead to pest and disease attacks. New shoots can be weak, creating a potential hazard from breakage. Further, topping a tree does not result in a smaller tree for long. The tree may attempt to spur growth back to its proper size. Some trees may not grow and will die.

The bottom line is: DO NOT TOP YOUR TREES. Included in the resources provided are guides to proper pruning. And remember, choose the right tree for the right place so you won’t have to go to extremes.

Resources

“Beginner Basics: Creating A Bonsai For The First Time,”

https://minnesotabonsaisociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/beginnerbasics_small.pdf

“Living Sculpture – Shrub Topiaries,”

http://www.hort.cornell.edu/livingsculpture/pdf/shrub_topiaries.pdf

“Growing Topiaries in Containers,” <https://extension.illinois.edu/container-gardens/growing-topiaries-containers>

“Espalier,” <https://ucanr.edu/site/uc-marin-master-gardeners/espalier>

“Pleaching,” <https://trees.umn.edu/nursery>

“Coppicing,” <https://nifatrees.org/Coppicing>

How to Prune Trees,” <https://www.fs.usda.gov/nrs/pubs/na/NA-FR-01-95-Rev-2012.pdf>

“Tree Topping Hurts Trees,” <https://utia.tennessee.edu/publications/wp-content/uploads/sites/269/2023/10/SP549.pdf>

“Tree-Topping: The Cost is Greater Than You Think,” <https://extension.psu.edu/tree-topping-the-cost-is-greater-than-you-think>

“General Pruning Techniques,” <https://content.ces.ncsu.edu/general-pruning-techniques#>

“Pruning Trees in the Home Landscape,” <https://extension.umd.edu/resource/pruning-trees-home-landscape/>

“Best Management Practices for Pruning Landscape Trees, Shrubs

and Ground Covers,” <https://eastern.tennessee.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/62/2020/02/UT-BMP-for-Pruning-Landscape-Trees-Shrubs-and-Ground-covers-PB1619.pdf>

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.

The Master Gardener Program is offered by the University of Tennessee Extension. The purpose of the Master Gardener program is to train people as horticultural-educated volunteers. These volunteers work in partnership with the local Extension office in their counties to expand educational outreach, providing home gardeners with researched-based information.