

Understanding Pruning Techniques

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Brian managed to condense a ten week, two hour course of lectures down into one evening. Think you knew about pruning? Brian's talk soon made you realise there was an awful lot more to learn.

Pruning is simply the removal of plant material; dead, dying, diseased or decayed. Formative pruning is trimming to maintain a shape or height. We are guilty of buying and then pruning when the plant has grown too big. Pruning should start in the first year, as a very hard prune on a mature plant may result in its demise and is hard work as well. Nowadays there are many varieties of dwarf and compact species, so decide what final height and spread of your plant is desirable, and buy accordingly. If you want to grow something vigorous, then consider restricting its roots in a container, or reducing it yearly. Figs can be grown well in pots in this way. Certain plants hate hard pruning, such as Ceanothus and Cistus, evergreens and conifers.

Flowering shrubs.

1. Shrubs that flower on wood of the current year. These usually bloom in Summer to Autumn. Prune them hard for vigorous growth, and good flowers will form on the tips of the new shoots. Pruning should be done when these shoots start to grow, and plants such as Buddleja, Caryopteris (which often starts into growth late), free standing Ceanothus, and Ceratostigma can be treated like this. Buddleia if dead headed will often flower again.

Erica plants can be trimmed over with shears in the Spring quite hard. Hydrangea Paniculata grows from virtually ground level so prune as close the soil level as possible. Lavatera should be hard pruned in Spring, but can be wind-blown in Autumn, so cut back by half then. Perovskia with its lovely lilac flowers and silver stems should be pruned almost to ground level and given a good mulch of leaf mould to protect it.

2. Shrubs flowering on wood of the previous year. These have a flowering season in Winter to early Summer. These should be pruned to encourage vigorous young growth, so are best pruned immediately after flowering. Buddleia alternifolia with its long, weeping fronds is in this group so be certain which type you have. Cistus should be examined in Spring and any dead wood removed in addition. Cytisus can be sheared all over. Deutzia needs its flowering shoots removed. The same applies to Itea ilicifolia, Jasminum humile, Kolkwitzia, Philadelphus, Weigela and Ribes, which need a hard prune after flowering. If you have roses with large colourful hips, such as Rosa Mayesii, wait until the hips start to go wrinkled and rot before pruning.

3. Shrubs flowering on shoots coming from older wood. These will mostly have a permanent branch framework. When buying look for a good overall shape and form. Prune out all dead, diseased damaged wood and remove crossing or competing branches. This group are best pruned immediately after flowering, especially if grown in containers. For Camellias remove all old flowers before they form fruit, although they may sulk for a year or two. Cornus are prone to diseased wood, but Viburnum may not need pruning at all.

4. **Tender shrubs.** Prune in Spring after all danger of frost has gone. Some may need protection over winter, and bracken if you can get it is free and very effective. These should never be pruned to encouraged late growth as the plant may suffer and die. Clerodendrom has a gorgeous scent but suckers badly so is best in a container. Carpenteria and Fuchsia should be cut down in Spring and given a good winter mulch to protect them. Solanum can be tidied up in Spring. Teucrium has beautiful silver foliage and can be kept pruned to the desired height.

5. **Grafted shrubs.** These include Hammamelis, Rhododendron, Roses, Syringa and Viburnum. Shoots may appear from the root stock. These are vigorous and should be removed right to the base, and are best pulled out rather than cut or they may regrow.

Shrubs for foliage.

Deciduous. Berberis can be cut back to 6 inches, and this will prevent flowering. Caryopteris should be pruned down hard. Cornus "Kelsey Gold" has striking yellow foliage and should be cut down hard in Spring. You can leave some shoots for flowering if desired. Physocarpus and Sambucus can be similarly treated.

Evergreen. Many do not need pruning other than to keep shape. Aucuba japonica can get over sized so prune down for shape and height. Daphne odorata is a lovely shrub but needs gentle pruning only to remove damage or disease. Euonymus can grow high against a wall or fence so trim in Spring. It is slow growing but prune any shoots reverting to plain green from variegated. Eleagnus can get fungal disease and hate pruning so just gently keep to shape. Pittosporum can be left except for reverted shoots. Santolina should be pruned hard in Spring if grown for foliage or left for 3 years for flowers then gently pruned.

Shrubs for twig effects.

Cornus "Winter Fire" is a striking example, but needs hard pruning in Spring. It also must be planted in full sun as this is what causes the development of the coloured bark. Rubus biflorus is rather fashionable and has white canes which can look magnificent against the contrasting red, but sadly it is a thug with rampant tendencies so unless you are prepared to put in a lot of work to control it, avoid it. Salix iorrata has silver stems and is much more manageable.

Pruning deciduous trees for foliage.

To produce big bold foliage, pruning is necessary. Paulownia should be hard pruned in Spring. Robinia and Acers will bleed so are best pruned when dormant. Modern trends with old established shrubs with a branch framework now advocate lifting the skirts (remove the lower branches to expose the bark of older stems) and thinning out to improve air circulation and a view through the shrub, which can then be attractively under-planted.

Fruit trees.

New root stocks developed in the early 20th century have very much simplified pruning. Go for the dwarf varieties which perform well. These can then be left free standing, or trained on walls and fences with supports and tied in. Some can be successfully pot grown but this depends on regular watering and feeding, so best for a watering system or very obliging neighbours. Plant in large pots and renew the top planting material yearly.

Pruning techniques for apple trees.

Regulated pruning is best for older trees, where you thin out the older branches. Renewal pruning is where the branches are cut back to half their length to stimulate new growth. Spur pruning aims to encourage fruiting spurs by cutting back in the summer to about 5 leaf joints. Trees are best pruned in the dormant state, but if you prune in summer this will remove excess foliage and produce more fruit.

Pears: These fruit on the ends of shoots or spurs. Prune all the new shoots back by half or two thirds.

Prunus: Cherries, Damsons, Peaches and Nectarines are all prone to silver leaf disease so **never** prune in the dormant season. These are best grown against a sunny wall to give shelter and warmth. If pruning is necessary at all, thin the fruits out to increase their size and avoid disease, and prune after fruiting.

Bush fruit: blackcurrants fruit best on wood of the previous year, whilst redcurrants, white currants and gooseberries fruit on older wood. Blackcurrants should be grown as a stool and pruned to encourage new growth from the base. The best method is to remove the shoots with the ripe fruit, which saves having to do two jobs.

Root pruning and stem ringing.

Growth can be limited on apples and pears by going around the exposed roots with a sharp spade and severing the shallower roots. Stem ringing is where a two inch band of bark is removed around the tree to limit growth. Best left to the experts!

Maples, birches and vines can bleed profusely after pruning so are best dealt with immediately after leaf fall. Vines should be pruned yearly and ideally should be done before Christmas.

Finally, be careful. Shears and secateurs are sharp. Never prune with blunt tools as you will tear the cut and allow disease to enter. Watch out while pruning plants with prickles and thorns and wear sturdy gloves. If you have to go up a ladder then think of your safety, don't over stretch and have a second person to hold the ladder.

Brian then moved on to a practical demonstration, where Margaret Dykes did her apple tree impersonation but fortunately escaped with limbs intact! Brian recommended Felco tools for pruning. Always prune as close to a bud as possible to avoid die-back.

After every use, wipe your blades and then rub with sandpaper to remove sap and maintain the edge. Don't try to use secateurs for large branches, use a good quality pruning saw instead. Loppers may be useful but it is difficult to make a clean cut. Shears with extending handles are good especially for trimming Erica, as you don't have to bend down so far. Every time you go down the garden have a pair of secateurs with you as you will always spot something that needs a tidy up. Brian cautioned against Coral Spot disease, which is found on discarded wood and pea sticks and can spread onto the bark of healthy trees. Anything infected should be burnt.

Brian's knowledgeable and amusing talk gave us all something new to learn and we all went home eyeing our shrubs and trees in an entirely new way.