

HORTICULTURE NEWSLETTER

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Pruning Shrubs

Many of us are eager to get outdoors after all this cold weather, so I will continue the discussion on pruning this week with an emphasis on shrubs.

Shrubs are pruned to maintain or reduce size, rejuvenate growth, and to removed dead branches. Shrubs are also pruned to encourage flowering, and this is something many people don't think about. A shrub that is left alone becomes more woody over time and that means less flowers. A shrub that is pruned regularly will get more light into it's interior which will foster fresh new shoots. New shoots result in many more flowers.

Evergreen shrubs maintain foliage all year and include plants like yews, junipers and boxwood. Deciduous shrubs lose their leaves each winter, and fit into three groups: shrubs that flower in the spring on wood produced last year, shrubs that flower later in the year on current season's growth, and shrubs that are grown for foliage rather than flowers.

Shrubs that flower in the spring should not be pruned until immediately after flowering to avoid cutting off all the flower buds. Pruning earlier will not harm the plant's health, but the flowering display will be reduced. Examples of these types of plants include forsythia, lilac, quince and mock orange.

Shrubs that bloom on current season's growth or that do not produce desirable flowers are best pruned in late winter and early spring. Examples include pyracantha, Rose-of-Sharon, spirea, and butterfly bush.

As with most pruning, late winter and early spring is the best time since it allows wounds to heal quickly with little threat from insects or disease. There are three basic methods used in pruning shrubs: thinning, heading back and rejuvenating.

Thinning is used to eliminate branches from a shrub that is too dense. The objective is to remove one-third of the oldest wood to the ground each year, which in turn stimulates new (flowering) growth from the base of the shrub. This is done in the spring before growth starts. It also involves removing many of the inward growing twigs by either cutting them back to a larger branch or cutting them back to just above an outward-facing bud.

Heading back is done by removing the end of a branch by cutting it back to a bud and is used for either reducing height or keeping a shrub to a compact size. Branches are not cut back to a uniform height because this results in a "witches-broom" effect.

Rejuvenation is the most severe type of pruning and may be used on multi-stem shrubs that have become too large, with too many old branches to justify saving the younger canes. Every stem on the plant is cut back to a 3- to 5-inch stub. This may no work for every shrub, but it does work well for many including spirea, forsythia, pyracantha, ninebark, little leaf mock orange, shrub roses and flowering quince.