

Late Winter Pruning

By Valerie Rose

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“Don’t be afraid to prune your trees and shrubs. By observing your plants through many seasons, making detailed observations, you’ll have the pleasure and reward of deeply understanding nature’s growth process.” Landscape Designer Ani Gurnee

Prune (mostly) now for healthy trees and shrubs.

Pruning used to be an annoying chore. I thought pruning meant cutting plants into uniform shapes, often quite contrary to nature’s design. This is actually ‘shearing,’ cutting the ends of branches to shape a plant into a uniform size or shape. Hedges are often *sheared*. If a hedge is getting too thick, or some branches are diseased or dead, it’s time to cut each of those branches back to their origin at a larger branch. This is *pruning*.

Late winter/early spring is the right time to prune many trees and shrubs, says landscape designer Ani Gurnee. “At this time of year, plants are still dormant, almost ready to go into their active growth phase,” Gurnee said. “Pruning cuts will heal quickly, which makes for healthier plants throughout their growing season.” Gurnee studied landscape design at Edmonds Community college. She will share her pruning wisdom at the next WSU Skagit County Master Gardener’s *Know and Grow* class – see Infobox for details.

GOOD PRUNING PREVENTS SUCKERS AND WATERSPROUTS

Never ‘top’ a tree, cutting off the top of a tree straight across. Topping destroys the tree’s natural shape, promoting a weak branch structure and the growth of water sprouts (often mistakenly called ‘suckers’.) “Have you ever seen a tree with a stringy, hairy crop of twigs growing straight up?” asks Cass Turnbull, author of ‘Cass Turnbull’s Guide to Pruning.’ “Those are water sprouts, and they result from bad pruning!” she declares. Water sprouts are the tree’s way of trying to replace branches that were improperly cut. The desire to ‘open up the view’ from a nearby house is usually the motivation to top trees, but the results look awful.

Let the tree retain its natural shape and height, remove dead branches that are dead, diseased or rubbing across other branches. If someone is worried about their ‘view’ they can cover windows with big posters of Mt. Rainier, the San Juan Islands – why not a beach on Tunisia? Presto, it’s a ‘view’ property - and the tree won’t grow shaggy, unhealthy water sprouts.



Before tree-topping (left) and after with myriad shaggy water sprouts (right)
Courtesy of Virginia Cooperative Extension <http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/430/430-458/430-458.html>

Suckers grow directly from plant roots. They grow straight up, and do not flower (in the case of roses) or form side branches (on trees.) “Suckers often grow from root stock that has a different plant grafted onto it,” says landscape designer Ani Gurnee. “Modern fruit trees and roses are often grafted onto sturdy root stock for more vigorous growth.” Suckers drain the plant’s energy away from the desired growth of the grafted top. Cut suckers right where they emerge from the root – you may need to pull away some soil to get at the sucker’s base.

WAIT! DON’T PRUNE EVERYTHING RIGHT NOW

Do not rush out to prune shrubs that bloom in spring, unless you don’t enjoy flowers. Forsythia, Lilac, Star Magnolia, Quince and Mockorange all bloom on last year’s growth. Wait to prune them until just after they bloom, or cut branches for the year’s first bouquets. Then plants will put on vigorous summer growth, forming next year’s buds on the remaining branches.

For pruning roses at the right time, Jan McNeilan, horticulturist with the Oregon State University Extension, uses a simple rhyme, “ ‘Roses are pruned when the forsythia blooms’ still rings true for most varieties. Most roses, except ramblers and climbers, should be pruned after danger of frost has ended.”

“Old-fashioned rambler and climbing roses can be pruned after flowering in late summer or early fall, to prevent winter wind damage,” McNeilan says. “Ramblers produce best on one-year-old wood – this year’s blooms come on last year’s growth. Climbers can be pruned lightly in the fall before frost. In late winter, cut out dead and diseased canes. Remove one or two of the oldest canes at ground level to make room for new vigorous canes.”

Fruit trees, roses and other shrubs are healthier when we observe them closely and prune them properly. With proper cuts, made in the right season, you can enjoy more fruit, flowers and healthy plants in the coming seasons. That’s a reward, not a chore.

Master Gardener Know & Grow Workshop

- What:** “Late-Winter Pruning for Healthy Growth”
with Landscape Designer Ani Gurnee.
- When:** Tuesday - March 22
- Time:** 1 PM – 2:30 PM
- Where:** WSU Mount Vernon Northwestern Research and
Extension Center
16650 State Route 536 (Memorial Highway)
- Information:** 360-428-4270, ext. 0

PRUNING CLEMATIS: ALL IN THE TIMING

If you prune a clematis vine at the wrong time, it won't flower. To ensure a lovely blooming season, learn how your variety is classified for pruning:

- **Pruning category 1 (or A):** DO NOT PRUNE unless needed to control plant size. These are usually very early bloomers, flowering in late winter or early spring.
- **Pruning category 2 (or B):** midseason, blooming in spring to early summer on old and new wood. Pruning before bloom interrupts their cycle, cutting off upcoming flowers. Prune after bloom.
- **Pruning category 3 (or C):** late season bloomers, late summer to autumn. "Hard prune" in late winter or early spring, leaving three inches aboveground.

Courtesy of WSU Master Gardeners of Clark County
http://clark.wsu.edu/volunteer/mg/gm_tips/Clematis2.html

PRUNING EVERGREENS

With few exceptions, evergreens (conifers) require little pruning. Different types of evergreens should be pruned according to their varied growth habits.

- **Spruces, firs and douglas-firs** don't grow continuously, but can be pruned any time because they have lateral (side) buds that will sprout if the terminal (tip) buds are removed. Best to prune in late winter, before growth begins.

- **Pines** seldom need pruning. To promote more dense growth, remove up to two-thirds of the length of newly expanded candles [bundles of bright-green new needles.] Prune before “candles” mature in June. Pines do not have lateral (side) buds, so removing terminal (tip) buds takes away new growing points for that branch. Eventually this leaves dead stubs.
- **Arborvitae, junipers, yews, and hemlocks** grow continuously throughout the growing season. Their natural form is usually most desirable, so prune only to remove diseased branches through mid-summer.

-Mike Zins and Deborah Brown, Extension Horticulturists
with the University of Minnesota Extension Service

RESOURCES

- *Cass Turnbull’s Guide to Pruning*, 2nd Edition, Seattle, Sasquatch Press, 2006
- ‘Pruning Tree Fruit: The Basics,’ Gary Moulton and Jacky King, WSU Mount Vernon Northwestern Washington Research and Extension Center:
<http://maritimefruit.wsu.edu/PruningBasics.html>
- ‘A Guide to Successful Pruning – Stop Topping Trees!’ Susan C. French, and Bonnie Lee Appleton, Virginia Cooperative Extension:
<http://pubs.ext.vt.edu/430/430-458/430-458.html>
- ‘To Prune or Not to Prune: Perennials,’ University of Illinois Extension:
<http://web.extension.illinois.edu/coles/yg/090831.html>
- Western Washington Fruit Research Foundation: www.wwfrf.org



Ani Gurnee, a professional landscape designer, talks in March about the approach needed to prune a weeping willow tree at the WSU Discovery Garden. Photo by Scott Terrell / Skagit Valley Herald



Western Washington Fruit Research Foundation volunteer Jim Taylor of Anacortes trims damaged branches off a blueberry bush at the WSU demonstration garden near Mount Vernon. Photo by Scott Terrell / Skagit Valley Herald.