

# Evergreen Care

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## Pruning pointers to keep your landscape looking clean and tidy

Our Pacific Northwest has more than its share of native and introduced evergreen plants, which give our natural and man-made landscapes a lush look year-round—when they aren't buried beneath snow, that is. Evergreen plants can be divided into two broad categories: 1) narrow-leaf (needled) evergreens such as pines, junipers and yews; and 2) broadleaf evergreens such as rhododendrons, hollies and box.

To keep your evergreens healthy and looking their best, a little pruning is sometimes in order. But don't overdo it. Pruning of most evergreens should be limited to the removal of dead, diseased, and injured wood, and the maintenance of the natural shape of the plants.

Dead, diseased, and broken wood can be removed at any time of year. However, for general pruning, the best time is in early spring just before growth begins, or during late winter. Narrow-leaf evergreens may be pruned a second time in June before the new growth has matured. It may be necessary to give particularly fast-growing plants an additional light pruning or two during the growing season.

Let's take a closer look at good pruning practices for some of the more common evergreens in our yards.



**Evergreens help feed** chipmunks and other wildlife. Evergreen trees like pines, fir and spruce and pruned in early spring – but only enough to maintain their natural shape. *Photo by Trish Varrelman / WSU Skagit County Master Gardener.*

**Pines:** Prune preferably in early spring. Make cuts just above needle whorls. Additional pruning may be done before new growth hardens in June. Pines normally require little pruning.

**Spruce and fir:** Cuts may be made at any point along the younger portions of the branches. The best time to prune these plants is in the early spring. This pruning can be made if it is necessary to maintain the natural shape of the plants.

**Juniper, chamaecyparis, arborvitae:** This group consists of many tree, shrub and prostrate forms. These species can withstand relatively heavy pruning and many may be

trained into various forms by shearing. Early spring pruning is best, but additional light pruning later in the season may be necessary.

**Yew and hemlock:** It is preferable to allow these plants to retain their natural form, but both respond well to heavy pruning and shearing. Yews are able to withstand exceptionally severe pruning into the older wood. Early spring is the best time for pruning, but occasional light pruning later in the season may be necessary.



**A Stellar's jay rests atop a bird's nest spruce. A budding rhododendron can be seen in the background. Photo by Lynn Heagney / WSU Skagit County Master Gardener.**

**Rhododendron, azalea, pieris, mountain laurel:** These plants generally require very little pruning, as they are slow-growing. Old flower clusters should be removed immediately after flowering. Prune out any dead, diseased, weak or wayward branches.

**Box, evergreen privet, barberry, pyracantha:** With the exception of box, these species grow rather rapidly. All these plants will stand heavy pruning. Early spring is a good time to prune them. Because they are generally quite vigorous, additional trimming during the growing season may be advisable.

**Hollies:** These plants include both tree and shrub forms. American holly may be pruned in December for Christmas greens. Chinese holly also is a source of attractive greens and may be trimmed in the early spring. When pruning American holly, always make the cut at a node,

just above a lateral bud. Prune so as to maintain the natural shape of the tree. The shrubby Chinese and Japanese hollies can be more severely pruned and may require some additional light pruning during the growing season.

**Mahonia, leucothoe:** These are rather slow growing and require little annual pruning, but if necessary, do it immediately after these plants flower in the spring.

Here in Skagit County, our relatively mild winters allow for a greater variety of evergreens that are suitable for planting in our landscapes. By giving a little attention their appearance and health as they grow, you can expect to enjoy your evergreens for years