

Late Winter/Early Spring Gardening

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Invigorate your plants

Now is the time of year to get outside during the increasingly frequent “sunbreak” days, and ready our yards and gardens for spring. Sharpen or replace the blades on those pruning tools (bypass pruner, lopper and pruning saw) and take advantage of this ideal time to prune MOST trees and shrubs. Late winter/early spring pruning will invigorate your plants for the growing season and reduces stress from pruning as the cuts seal faster during spring growth cycle. Also, it is much easier to see the shape of deciduous plants and any dead, diseased or crossing branches before new leaves appear.

What Not to Prune in Late Winter

Wait to prune spring flowering shrubs and trees that bloom on last year’s growth. Some examples are: *Forsythia*, quince, bridal wreath *Spirea*, lilac, mock orange, *Kerria*, redbud, dogwood and ornamental fruit trees. These should be pruned after flowering. *Hydrangea macrophylla* (Big Leaf) and *Hydrangea quercifolia* set bloom buds on last year’s growth, so wait to cut back until after they flower in summer. *Gardenias* should be pruned immediately after blooming. Old-fashioned roses, damasks, ramblers, and climbing roses can be pruned after flowering in late summer or early fall before first frost. Dead or diseased canes can be removed in late winter.

Deciding when to prune *Clematis* depends on the type. Very early bloomers that flower in late winter or early spring should NOT be pruned, except to control the size of the plant. Those that bloom in spring and early summer should be pruned after bloom.

Some trees, such as maple, birch, and walnut bleed sap profusely after pruning. This does not harm the tree, but pruning in fall or early winter can reduce bleeding and be less messy. Oaks, crab apples, and elms are better pruned in winter, after leaf fall, to reduce pest access to fresh pruning cuts.

Grape vines also bleed heavily unless pruned in deepest winter when the vines are asleep. Wait until the leaves are out and the fruit or flowers have set before pruning away excess canes and shoots. Much has been written about pruning methods for grape vines, so consult with your local extension service for more detailed instruction applicable to your type of grape vine.

What to Prune Now

Evergreen Conifers: Most conifers require little pruning. They are generally pruned for shape or to remove unwanted branches. Spruces and firs have lateral side buds and will sprout if the terminal buds are removed. Prune these before growth begins.



Cutting back a rose to an outside-facing bud. *Photo by Kristie Jacoby / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

Pines can be pruned to increase density by removing no more than two-thirds of the new “candles” (bright green tips). Cutting out the candle completely will eliminate new growth for the branch and leave dead stubs.

Arborvitae, junipers, yews and hemlocks have a naturally desirable form, so remove only dead or diseased branches. A note about shearing needled evergreen hedges (except yew) – most develop a “dead zone” of bare wood on the inside that expands every year. They will not green up if you shear too deeply into the old wood.

Thuja occidentalis ‘Pyramidalis’ is not recommended as a sheared hedge and will not green up if cut into the dead zone, but pruning is not needed for this hedge conifer due to its ideal size.

Fruit Trees: Pruning fruit trees will result in some flower and fruit loss, but generally promotes vigorous growth and larger, tastier fruit. Pruning goals are aimed at ridding the tree of damage or disease, encouraging new growth and developing strong limb structure, encouraging new limb formation, and controlling tree height to allow access to the fruit. Each type of tree has special pruning guidelines, so do some research on best practices for your tree. When the buds begin to green, apply dormant spray to trees to smother insect larvae.

Roses: Prune tea, hybrid tea and floribunda roses to a height of 12-24 inches. Trim to an outside-facing bud, about one-quarter inch above the bud at a downward angle. Remove at

ground level any broken, dead or crossing canes. Clean dead leaves from the soil and remove mulch to prevent black spot and molds.



A compound lopper (top), a bypass-type pruner and pruning saw are essential tools for late-winter gardening. Photo by Kristie Jacoby / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardener.

Shrubs: Prune broad-leaf evergreen shrubs, like boxwood, holly, privet, and *Euonymus* as well as shrubs that don't flower in spring, such as crape myrtle, rose of Sharon, *Buddleia*, *Barberry*, Japanese maple, *Cotoneaster*, *Lonicera*, and peegee *Hydrangea*. Prune to shape plants and thin their interiors. *Hydrangea paniculata* (hardy hydrangea) can be cut back to two buds above the base of the flower stem, or even back to the ground, as they bloom on new wood. *H. arborescens* also blooms on new wood and can be cut back from 1-3 feet from the ground.

Finally, cut back ornamental grasses to 6-12 inches height. Remove dead growth from perennials, like hellebore and ferns before new growth emerges.

If you prefer to add to your garden before beginning maintenance on what is already growing, late winter is an excellent time for the intrepid gardener to plant bare-root shrubs and trees. They are less expensive to purchase, and because they are planted in the same soil from the newly-dug hole, they adapt and grow faster than those in containers or burlap. Look for strong stems that have not leafed out, and fresh, well-formed (not dry or slimy) roots. Plant as soon as possible after purchase.

Both late-winter pruning and planting bare-root shrubs and trees are two important tasks to help ready your garden for spring.

RESOURCES:

- *Sunset Western Garden Book*, 7th Edition
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- Richards, D and Patterson, P. February 2008. *Apple trees benefit from proper pruning, spring and summer*. Oregon State University Extension Service.
- *Garden Tasks Calendar*. WSU Extension. Chelan and Douglas Counties.
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- *Pruning Deciduous Shrubs*. WSU Spokane County Extension. Publication #C110.