

# Rejuvenating Your Garden: Part I

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## Change is a part of gardening

Have you ever thought “Where do I begin?” as you gazed at your overgrown landscape? Or does it sometimes cross your mind that your garden looks old or tired, not rich and vibrant? Maybe you would like a newer look, not just restore it to the way it used to be. That is the subtle difference between rejuvenating your garden and restoring it. You are looking to bring new life to your landscape, a younger, fresher look.

Before you bring out the chain saw and shovel or hire a back hoe you need to formulate a plan that includes how you want to use the space, your budget, time frame, labor and what look you want. You will need to do a site assessment for things such as soil health, and to consider zoning restrictions, your neighbors, underground utility lines, building codes and weather. More important, how much do you want to do yourself? It can be more satisfying to do most of it yourself, but it may take longer. You are the one in a hurry, not the garden. That can be a good thing. It is given that you may have to hire some professional help depending on the project.

Assessing your site means to take a serious look at what needs to go away, and what can stay. How healthy is the soil? What doesn't thrive there and why? How much sunlight or shade? What are the drainage patterns? How will your neighbors be affected? Do not surprise them by removing that large tree or fence that gives them shade and privacy. Maintain good terms with your neighbor, and they might be available when you need a helping hand or access to a back corner.

Old trees, hedges and shrubs which are too big for your site might be the first to be removed. Trees can grow old, but they do not have to do it on your property. There is no rule that says you must keep something you do not like or that has outgrown its usefulness. But be aware that such removal will affect the amount of light available to your other plants and their growth.

Drainage patterns and soil health need to be addressed before you begin. Knowing what you have can mean the difference between success and disappointment. Your plan should include details of the hardscaping, such as fences, walls, sidewalks or paths, patios, eating area, parking, storage space, access to water, lighting, play area, raised beds and other features you may want. Decisions such as plant selection come later.



Jenna Shinn decides where to make pruning cuts to a rhododendron as she reclaims a garden. *Photo by Kay Torrance / WSU Skagit County Extension Master Gardeners.*

Your budget greatly affects what materials you use. And your style. A stone path is beautiful, very permanent, costly to install and expensive. Arborist chips do the job at almost no cost but are not everyone's idea of a lovely pathway.

Your rejuvenated garden needs to harmonize with your house and you. Design it to be something you love.

Once you have a detailed plan you can begin to think about the when and how. Do I start now or wait a year to observe a whole cycle of seasons? What kind of weather do I need for digging ditches or for pouring concrete? What do I save and what do I get rid of? How do I remove that Douglas fir, big leaf maple or laurel hedge? What should I do with that rotting fence or badly broken concrete sidewalk? How do I prune an old arborvitae hedge or any neglected tree or shrub? Should I bring in a dumpster? When will I have the time?

It is best to give yourself a couple of years to rejuvenate your yard, breaking it into small steps within your overall plan. Know that things tend to take longer than you expect,

Do not start buying new plants quite yet. Take before and after pictures. It is hard to remember what something looked like, and it is fun to record the changes. You will be glad you did.

Plants need light and air to thrive. Get yourself a good book about pruning all kinds of shrubs and trees that you can take out into the garden with you. Make sure your loppers, pruners and saws are sharp. Some shrubs respond well to restorative pruning almost to the ground, others do not and may die.

Time of year affects regrowth, too. Do your homework and be patient. You will gain confidence as you work. If you are nervous about pruning, start with the basics by removing the four Ds: dead, damaged, diseased, and dysfunctional (wayward/crossing branches or suckers). Begin on your hands and knees underneath the shrub and prune from the inside out. You will be surprised how much better it will look with that done.

For restorative pruning, the guideline is to remove up to 1/3 of the stems or trunks to within a few inches of the ground for those shrubs which respond to heavy pruning. You do not need to be timid with *Forsythia*! When dealing with a grafted shrub such as many roses, do be sure you do not cut off the grafted part. The root stock is not the plant you want.

Lightly fertilize and thoroughly water your pruned plant. Some old plants such as heathers and lavenders do not respond to heavy pruning into deadwood and won't regrow those areas. Those plants may have outlived their usefulness in your garden, so it may be time to replace them with new specimens.

Change is an integral part of gardening. No garden is static. Nature makes changes in your garden as well as you do,

The next half of this article will talk about dealing with weeds, including blackberries, stump removal, pests or other common problems. And the fun part: selecting plants and proper planting

## **RESOURCES:**

- Rejuvenating a Garden. Stephen Anderton. 1998. Kyle Cathie Ltd, North. USA edition 1999 Soma Books by arrangement with Kyle Cathie Ltd
- Cass Turnbull's Guide to Pruning. Third Edition. 2012. Sasquatch Books
- Sunset Western Garden Book-9th edition. Kathleen Brenzel, Editor. 2012. Time Home Entertainment, Inc.
- Sustainable Landscapes and Gardens. Dr. Linda Chalker-Scott. 2009. GFG Publishing
- WSU Extension Bulletin." Guide to Ornamental Pruning." Ray Malieke