

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 Gurnee. “At this time of year, plants are still dormant, almost ready to go into their active growth phase,” Gurnee adds. “Pruning cuts will heal quickly, which makes for healthier plants throughout their growing season.” Gurnee studied landscape design at Edmonds Community College.

GOOD PRUNING PREVENTS SUCKERS AND WATERSPROUTS

Do not “top” a tree, that is, cutting off the top of a tree straight across. Topping destroys the tree’s natural shape, creates a weak branch structure and promotes the growth of water sprouts often mistakenly called “suckers.” (Suckers are new growth from the roots or lower main stem of the plant.)

“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’re the result of 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.

TREES ARE THE VIEW!

Let the tree retain its natural shape and height, remove branches that are dead, diseased or rubbing across other branches. If neighbors are worried about their view, they can cover

windows with big posters of Mt. Rainier, the San Juan Islands—why not a beach in Tunisia? Presto! It's a view property—and the tree won't grow shaggy, unhealthy water sprouts.



Left: Master Gardener Sandy Fielden prunes ornamental grass in the Discovery Garden. **Right:** The finished product. *Photos by Trish Varrelman / WSU Skagit County Master Gardeners*

As mentioned earlier, 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 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 Mock Orange 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. 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,” and it still rings true for most varieties.

Prune roses, except ramblers and climbers, 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 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 vigorous new 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.

PRUNING CLEMATIS: ALL IN THE TIMING

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

- Pruning category 1 (or A): Very early bloomers, flowering in late winter or early spring. DO NOT PRUNE unless needed to control plant size.
- Pruning category 2 (or B): Mid-season, 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.

PRUNING EVERGREENS

With few exceptions, evergreens (conifers) require little pruning. Different types of evergreens should be pruned according to their varied growth habits. Mike Zins and Deborah Brown, horticulturists with the University of Minnesota Extension Service, give these guidelines:

- 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. It is 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.

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.

<https://s3.wp.wsu.edu/uploads/sites/2109/2019/12/PruningWesternWA.pdf>

- "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 <https://aces.illinois.edu/news/pruning-perennials-better-shape>
- Western Washington Fruit Research Foundation. www.wwfrf.org
- "Garden Mastery Tips Clematis" WSU Master Gardeners of Clark County <https://s3.wp.wsu.edu/uploads/sites/2079/2014/02/Clematis2.pdf>

Note: some hyperlinks in this article have been updated since its initial publication.