

PRUNING TIPS – TIMING

A question frequently asked about pruning is, “When is the best time to prune?” The answer varies according to the species of plant and the type of pruning. Here are a couple of all-purpose pruning rules: If you are removing only dead, diseased or broken branches, then any time is the right time to prune. If you are selectively pruning (as opposed to shearing) and are removing less than 10% of the plant’s canopy, it is also okay to prune any time.

Winter is a good time to prune most deciduous plants. The plants are dormant, meaning you won’t disrupt active growth and it is easier to see the branch structure without leaves. Be aware, however, that pruning during very cold weather may increase the chance of frost crack and branch dieback. Branch collars may freeze if exposed by pruning, which interferes with the plant’s ability to seal wounds. Winter pruning will stimulate heavy growth in the spring.

Late winter and early spring is a good time to prune evergreens. They are less likely to dehydrate as the soil thaws, but are still dormant, so you have the best of two seasons.

Spring pruning will cause plants to grow more vigorously than pruning at any other time. This can be good, if you’re planning a large-scale reduction or rejuvenation of a hedge. Although it doesn’t usually harm the plant, certain species “bleed” when spring pruned. These include maples, elm, walnuts, grapes, and dogwood. Leave these species for fall pruning if you don’t want them dripping. Try not to prune from the time leaves first emerge until they have reached their mature size and color. Pruning during leaf emergence is more likely to cause water sprouts and suckers due to disruption of growth regulators in the plant.

Summer pruning generally stresses plants, especially if you remove a significant amount of tissue. Beware of exposing previously shaded areas of the trunk to full sun, as this can cause sunscald. Plants don’t grow back as quickly when pruned during the summer, so this is a good time to remove water sprouts. Summer is an easy time to spot dead wood, and pruning it out causes no stress or harm to the plant. Trees and shrubs will be healthier if dead tissue is removed

Early fall pruning can be stressful to plants. It may encourage soft growth that will freeze over the winter, leaving the plant susceptible to disease. Once leaves begin to change color, it is best to wait until they have all fallen before pruning.

Some trees are prone to pest infestation when pruned at the wrong time. For example, pruning an apple or crabapple around the time they bloom creates entrance wounds for a bacterial disease called Fireblight. Before doing any large-scale pruning, make sure your tree won’t be the target of one of these pests. To learn more, you can contact the Master Gardener Plant Clinic or consult a certified arborist for more information about the trees you want to prune.