

# Fall Pruning

by Carol Barany

“Just because you can doesn’t mean you should.”

Every time I’m tempted to pick up a pair of pruners in early autumn, Cass Turnbull’s sage advice (I’ve quoted the founder of PlantAmnesty many times) reminds me that sometimes in gardening, ‘what not to do’ is more important than ‘what to do’. If autumn’s imminent arrival has you hankering to have a go at pruning your shrubs, you may want to think twice.

Turnbull estimates that 80% of pruning done by homeowners and professionals alike is bad or unnecessary, resulting in plants that are “unhealthy, unpretty, unmanageable, and costly to maintain”. According to Turnbull, it’s a myth that gardeners must prune regularly to keep their shrubs in good condition. Your garden may really not require as much maintenance as you’ve been giving it.

Take a look at one of your early spring bloomers, like a lilac, magnolia, forsythia, or big leaf or oak leaf hydrangea. All the fuzzy nubs you see emerging from the stems are flower buds. What happens if these shrubs are pruned now? It’s simple. You’ll eliminate flowering next spring.

That’s because those shrubs will bloom next spring on wood that grew this year, which means they bloom on ‘old’ wood. The time to prune is immediately after flowering fades next year. The list includes andromeda (Pieris), beauty bush (Kolwitzia) choke cherry, cotoneaster, daphne, deutzia, fothergilla, kerria, mock orange, pyracantha, quince, some early blooming spireas, sweetshrub (Calycanthus), viburnum, weigela, wisteria, and witch hazel.

There are summer-flowering shrubs that bloom from buds on wood that grows earlier in spring of the same year, which means they bloom on ‘new’ wood. Prune these in late winter or early spring while they’re still dormant. This list includes abelia, barberry, burning bush, butterfly bush, Caryopteris, Clethra, dogwood, honeysuckle, panicle and ‘Annabelle-type’ hydrangeas, hypericum, Japanese spirea, ninebark, potentilla, rose-of-Sharon, sandcherry, smokebush, and Vitex,

Most modern roses bloom on new wood and flower almost continuously from early summer until frost. These include hybrid teas, grandifloras, floribundas, and some ramblers and climbers. Prune them in the spring after winter protection is removed. Some roses bloom on old wood and have a single flush of flowers in early summer. These include the Alba, Damask, Gallica, moss, some ramblers and climbers. Spring pruning is called for, but should be limited to removing dead or diseased canes. Summer pruning (after bloom and before mid-August) can be done to shape these roses if you think they need it.

There are exceptions to every rule. In this case, it’s the Four Ds. Branches that are dead, diseased, damaged or deranged (they rub against other branches, point the wrong way, or are an obstruction) can be removed at any time.

Before you prune, visualize how the plant will look after you've finished. An ocean of Super Glue can't put branches back when you've gone too far.

The techniques of pruning are just as important as the timing. These days, the buzz of electric hedge trimmers taking this year's growth off shrubs can be heard up and down the block. In most cases, it's a time-consuming effort to control size and improve appearance.

In fact, what shearing accomplishes is just the opposite. While appropriate for formal hedges and topiary, most shrubs shouldn't be pruned this way. Shearing will destroy the shrub's natural form, or reduce the amount of foliage and flowers in the interior. And it just might stimulate a rapid flush of fresh growth this fall that won't have time to harden off, making it vulnerable to winter kill. Wait until late this winter or next spring and use thinning or selective heading cuts instead.

Thinning preserves the plant's natural shape and is particularly useful for shrubs that sucker from the base. Remove interior branches with loppers or a pruning saw back to the base of the plant or the point of origin, but remove only 1/3 of the largest branches at one time.

Selective heading can be used to reduce the height of most shrubs, but only for a while. What you cut off will eventually re-grow. You can't make a giraffe into a Chihuahua. Remove each branch back to a larger branch or bud, leaving no stumps. Selective heading reduces the amount of re-growth, looks more natural, and is healthier for the plant. Combined with thinning, the vast majority of shrubs should be pruned this way.

Most shrubs look their best when allowed to grow as they were meant to, rather than in tight forms of an Edward Scissorhands. So prune only when necessary, and always consider timing and proper technique when you do.

YouTube has a six-part Guide to Pruning featuring Cass Turnbull. Check it out before you pick up those pruners.