

## Proper Pruning Techniques

When a gardener interferes in the natural process of successful plant growth, we'd like to think it's for good reason, and usually for a positive end. But pruning is one well-intended intervention that can turn a healthy plant into either a beautiful specimen or a disfigured, wounded mess.

Learning to wield pruning tools like a pro takes a bit of learning and practice. Consider knowledge as the first and best tool to gather before indiscriminately lopping your ornamentals.

Read on for information on why, when and how to prune, and consult the resources at the end of this article for more detailed information on this key maintenance discipline.

## Why Prune?

The primary function of pruning is to remove plant parts that serve no further use to the plant to improve its health and value.

The best reasons to prune are:

1. Removing dead or competing branches.
2. Redirecting branches if growth is impacted by nearby structures.
3. Clearing suckers or weak vertical shoots from the base of the tree.
4. Removing spent flowers or fruit clusters to encourage next year's production.
5. Minor thinning to open crowded sections to allow better light exposure and airflow.
6. Shaping to produce hedges, espalier or topiary.



Often trees or shrubs are pruned for the purposes of complete reshaping, however; genetics dictate the overall shape of a shrub or tree. Aggressive pruning will not result in a transformed habit. The best way to achieve the shape you desire is to select a tree or shrub that will mature that way and allow the plant to grow as designed.

## When to Prune

Understand first the needs and growth cycle of your subject plant, and prune only when risk of damage is minimal and pruning is necessary.

Generally, light corrective pruning can be performed anytime during the year, major pruning should be done in late winter or early spring. When pruning any plant, consider that the energy

used by the roots and stems to produce new growth in spring is replaced by the new leaves themselves, so pruning off this new growth before these carbohydrates are replenished sets back the growth of the plant. Also, spring bloomers are best pruned after blooming (not in winter or early spring) as they set their flowers in summer and fall.

Late summer pruning is also discouraged, as it will produce tender new growth too late to properly harden off before temperatures drop.

Finally, young trees should be allowed to establish before any major pruning is performed. Remove dead, diseased or damaged parts only at planting time to allow the remaining healthy leaves to produce as much energy as possible for the plant. Once established, begin to [train](#) your tree on a regular schedule to ensure proper form and avoid the risks of drastic pruning.

## How to Prune

When considering pruning, decide first if pruning is necessary. For trees, always prune to align with the natural shape, and do not “top” from the canopy down. When trimming, cut close at the collar of the branch. Always cut back to the next limb or trunk, leaving no stub.



Depending on the needs of your shrubs, several strategies - thinning, renewal or rejuvenation - can be employed. Trim shrubs to maximize leaf exposure to sun, and check for suckers, misshapen, dead or crossing branches, or those rubbing against or growing into structures.

Use sharp tools and standard [appropriate pruning methods](#) to avoid injury and disease or insect vulnerability.

Special consideration must be taken with coniferous evergreens; consult [this OSU fact sheet](#) first before attempting to prune these classes.

With some sharp tools, strategy and a little know-how, anyone can prune appropriately to ensure their landscape shrubs, ornamentals and vines remain healthy for years to come.

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Resources:

[Pruning Ornamental Trees, Shrubs and Vines: OSU Fact Sheet HLA-6409](#)

[Texas A&M Agrilife Extension: Follow Proper Pruning Techniques](#)

[Training Young Shade and Ornamental Trees: OSU Fact Sheet HLA-6415](#)