

MESSENGER-INQUIRER



February 4, 2023

Pruning Trees and Shrubs for Beauty and Blooms

After staying indoors in cold and wet weather, the bare branches of trees and shrubs begin to catch my attention. However, with the current winter damage, wait before reaching for the pruners to do major pruning on plants with injury. Pruning is used on plants to correct undesirable growth such as low-hanging branches, control size and shape, prevent crossing and rubbing branches, thin out dense growth, remove dead wood, and encourage flower production.

When do you prune shrubs and trees that were damaged from December's below-zero temperatures? It is advised to wait until bud break to see what plant tissue is still alive. If pruned now to living tissue, this tissue could be exposed to cold temperatures yet to come and become injured as well.

When do you prune to maintain a shrub or tree? The proper removal of branches is much more important than a date on a calendar. The key is to neither cut into the branch collar nor to leave a stub. Cutting too close removes tissue that signals the plant to set boundaries for resisting the spread of a disease. Leaving a stub inhibits the formation of a boundary and results in decay spreading from the stub into the tree. Illustrations of proper pruning techniques are

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available at <http://www2.ca.uky.edu/agcomm/pubs/ho/ho101/ho101.pdf> or from an extension office.

All pruning cuts should be made back to or just above a growing point. For example, remove branches just above a bud, above a side branch, back to a main branch or trunk, or back to the ground.

For undamaged plants, the worst time to prune is at bud break in the spring. The shrub or tree uses all the stored energy from the last season to develop leaves. At this time, injuries are much worse. Another undesirable time to prune is during leaf drop in the fall. The plant needs energy to close the surface area where the leaf was attached to the tree or shrub. Furthermore, do not prune a tree or shrub when the wood is frozen. This damages the plant's water-conducting tubes called xylem. The damage to the branch appears during hot, dry weather when water is not able to move through the branch to the leaves.

The flowering period of the ornamental shrub or tree is a way to determine when to prune. If showy fruits are a feature of the plant, remember that the fruits develop from the flowers. Removing the flowers also removes the fruit.

For example, shrubs that flower before the end of May should be pruned during or immediately after flowering. The flowers are formed on wood from the previous summer. By pruning them right after they bloom, maximum time is allowed before winter to develop the wood for next season's flowers. If pruned during the winter or before flowering in the spring, flower buds are removed and blossoms are reduced or eliminated for the coming season.

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Summer-flowering shrubs that flower after the end of May should be pruned in the winter or spring before new growth begins. They bloom on wood formed during the current spring or summer.

Certain shrubs may be pruned lightly before and after flowering. This often increases flowering and fruit production and may result in a second bloom during the year. Examples of this group include glossy abelia, butterflybush, red twig dogwood, spreading cotoneaster, multiflora cotoneaster, Oregon hollygrape, Anthony waterer spirea, Froebel spirea, snowberry, and wiegela.

Ornamental trees that flower before the end of May should be pruned immediately after flowering.

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Some trees, such as birch, yellowwood, elm, pine, spruce, fir, and maple, may bleed excessively if pruned in late winter to spring. Bleeding or loss of sap will not harm the tree but may be unsightly or messy. Bleeding may be reduced by pruning such trees when they are in full leaf which would be in June.

Another key is to keep the pruning equipment sharp. A clean cut forms callus tissue to wall itself off faster and causes less injury to the tree. After removing the branch, allow the tree to use its own defenses to protect itself.

The bypass type of hand pruners and two-handed lopping shears with the scissors cutting action cleanly cuts the stem without crushing it. Hand pruners cut stems up to three-quarters

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inch in diameter. Attempting to cut larger branches risks making a poor cut and/or ruining the shears. Lopping shears cut branches up to 1 to 1.5 inches in diameter.

Pruning saws cut on the pull stroke. The narrow blades fit into tight spaces and make clean cuts. They are recommended for removing branches over 1 inch in diameter.

Disinfect tools after each cut, especially when pruning a tree with a disease like crab apples which are affected by fire blight, by applying Lysol or 70 percent denatured ethyl alcohol to the blades. Disinfect tools with each cut and before pruning the next plant.

For more information, contact the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service at 270-685-8480 or annette.heisdorffer@uky.edu.

Annette's tips:

Do not apply paint or tar where a branch on a shrub or tree is removed. Research shows the pruning paint holds in moisture, increases decay, and inhibits formation of wound wood roll to close off the area.

Upcoming Event:

Join us Tuesday, February 7 at 6:00 p.m. as guest speaker Michael Hicks of Living Roots Farm shares with us How to Create an Abundant Organic Vegetable Garden. This program will take place at the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service Office.

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