



Pruning Basics

Pruning trees or shrubs can be one of the most daunting tasks a gardener tackles. It is not unreasonable, although generally misplaced, to worry that a few bad snips could ruin the look or worse, the health, of a valuable plant. Additionally, learning about pruning takes more than a quick look at a webpage or a short seminar. You can, however, learn some basic information that will help you to become a much more confident gardener as you wield your pruners.

Before you make any cuts, it is very important to know why you are pruning. We prune for three reasons:

Health: For the overall health of the plant, we often prune to allow in more light, air or both. Dense branching can be a haven for pests and diseases and can also keep spray treatments from penetrating where they are present. Pruning also occurs to correct issues with natural growth that may develop into weak branches.

Shape and Size: While we do not prune to keep a fifty foot tree at ten feet, we do prune to keep some plants from overgrowing sites in both width and height. It is important to select plants that fit the site they are chosen for but light pruning to shape a plant's form to the site is perfectly acceptable.

Fruiting and Flowering: Many plants require the pruning away of old wood to allow new wood to grow and flower well. Don't forget, before we get fruit, we must have flowers! For fruit trees, proper branching that allows air and light to penetrate throughout the canopy helps develop and ripen fruit.

Before you start cutting, use the right tool and make sure it is sharp and in good working order. Here is a quick review of pruning tools.

Pruners: Pruners come in two types, bypass and anvil. Bypass pruners work with two blades, the lower blade supports the stem while the upper cutting blade comes down alongside it, making a very clean cut. Bypass pruners are the preferred type for most gardeners. Anvil pruners work when the two blades come together flatly. While they have their uses, for most plants the way anvil pruners crush stems is not a good idea. Pruners work on stems with a diameter of less than one half inch.

Loppers: Loppers come in the same two types as pruners, bypass and anvil and for the same reasons; we prefer the bypass style for most tasks. Many loppers have handles that can be extended, a good idea for extra leverage and reach into dense or thorny shrubs. Loppers work for stems with diameters of up to one and one half inch easily.

Pruning saws: A good pruning saw may only be used occasionally but when a gardener needs one, it does the job like nothing else. Pruning saws may be small enough to fit into a jacket pocket or large enough to require both hands to use. Many are self-cleaning but may require periodic professional sharpening.

Pole pruners: Pole pruners allow gardeners to have the use of both loppers and a saw with a greatly extended reach. They are a must have tool for orchardists and gardeners with many trees to tame.

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One last word on tools, take time to learn to sharpen your pruners, loppers and saws. Dull tools make bad cuts. Sharp tools make the work of pruning easier and better for your plants. This is something you can find useful demonstration videos online for.

Pruning a stem can make it stronger, induce it to flower or cause a new branch to grow but which one happens depends of what type of cut you make, where you make it in relation to nearby buds and what time of year you prune.

The tip of any stem on any plant contains a hormone called auxin that inhibits the growth of buds lower down on the stem. Cut that tip off and you disrupt the flow of auxin, allowing lower buds to grow. Whether you are pinching the tips off the main stem of an annual such as a geranium or cutting the leader on a fruit tree by one third, you are making a heading cut.

Heading back a leader by one third will generally stimulate growth from many lower buds and fuller branching. Making the same cut but taking two thirds of the stem's length, will stimulate fewer buds but they will grow more vigorously. It does not matter if you are pruning a dahlia or a maple, the stem will respond the same way every single time. It does, however, matter how old the stem you are pruning is. Growth will be more vigorous on a newer stem than one that is older. Heading cuts are made to stimulate growth.

Removing an entire branch at its junction with another branch is a different kind of cut called a thinning cut. Typically there is no response from other buds or branches with thinning cuts. Thinning cuts are made to reduce growth and are used to shape plants especially to allow light and air into the center.

When you prune anything is as important as how. Here in Montana, we typically get our pruning done in late winter and early spring. Generally speaking, pruning that occurs when a plant is dormant stimulates growth when it awakens. However, pruning to stimulate growth during the growing season can damage a plant if the growth happens too late in the season.

During the growing season, we can make thinning cuts on shrubs and trees for appearance. We can also remove waterspouts or suckers on fruit trees at any time.

When you cut above a bud, make sure to cut at a steep angle so that the bud is on the longer side. This extra tissue helps prevent the bud from damage caused by drying out. On evergreens, hide cuts by making angled cuts that face down.

There is one last general rule to obey. Whenever, whatever you are pruning never remove more than one third of the total mass of the tree, shrub or plant. Plants need leaves to survive and thrive and if you remove too many stems, you are also reducing foliage.

Here at Plant Land we are always happy to answer your pruning questions.

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