



Pruning is one of the most important, and easiest, techniques to promote healthy, balanced growth and increase the production capabilities of flowering shrubs. Most people are intimidated by the prospect of cutting into plants that appear to be healthy. This is often referred to as the “if it’s not broke don’t fix it” technique of pruning maintenance. But that easy technique may lead to negative plant health issues – evidenced by increased disease and insect problems, and less blooms. So...how do you get started in the, often intimidating, world of pruning?

Before picking up any pruning tool, you first need to understand the plants you have or plan to purchase. Each plant species has individual genetics that determine the color, habit/growth structure, flowering periods, and the ability to withstand our attempts to help them along. If you know the scientific name of your plants, a good reference source – either purchased, found at a local library or online – will allow you to quickly research and understand the expected growth habits. (One of my favorite books is titled *The Manual of Woody Plant Material* by Michael Dirr.) If you have inherited the plants from previous owners, or tags have been lost or misplaced, observing the growth cycle of the plant, over an entire year, will help you to determine how to treat it when pruning. For these unknown plants, watch and note (a garden journal is a good idea) flowering period, where new growth occurs, if suckers form around the base, if it is a single trunk or multi-stem plant, or if there is a graft union present. Once you have determined when the plant flowers and how the structure is supposed to look you can begin to plan your pruning timing and technique.

Timing is crucial in pruning for continued flowering success. Generally, for flowering shrubs, pruning should be done shortly after the shrub has finished flowering. Spring flowering shrubs will set buds before that growing season has ended. If pruned in fall, winter, or early spring you may cut off the flower buds and rather than enjoying the spring blooms you’ll just be wondering where they are. Summer and fall flowering shrubs develop the buds throughout the growing season prior to flowering therefore pruning late in the spring season may reduce or eliminate flowering. Some plant materials flower on first year growth, some on second or subsequent year wood. Unless you are very familiar with determining the age of woody tissue, following general rules (yes, there are always exceptions) will get you through basic timing for pruning flowering shrubs.

Also important, in timing any pruning activity, are the intended results. Pruning to encourage increased

vegetative growth is best achieved very early in the spring - after most of the intensely cold weather threats have passed but before the new leaves have emerged in the spring. Controlling growth and managing plant size is most successfully accomplished through summer pruning - after the new growth has emerged. Summer pruning should be done before the end of August in our area, as any pruning done later than that may open up the newer, tender vegetation for early frost damage.

There are many different growth structures, but knowing the basics of how to address multi-stemmed and single stemmed plants will get you through. Multi-stemmed shrubs are those that have many branches emerging from the ground (often referred to as suckers), two commonly found examples are *Syringa vulgaris* (shrub lilac) and *Cornus stolonifera* (red twig dogwood). These can easily be pruned with a technique called renewal pruning, which is to remove about 1/3 of the total branches, generally the oldest, at the ground level. This will promote new healthy growth; and in the case of *Cornus stolonifera*, that new red colored growth is more attractive than the old gray colored growth. Do not use renewal pruning techniques for single stemmed shrubs - you may be left with a stump that will work nicely to hold small flower pots, but will not encourage much, if any, new growth. If you have a shrub that has a graft union (many roses do), do not prune off the plant to a point beneath that graft union. Grafted plant material is made up of two separate plants – one at the root level that has strong growth characteristics and one above the ground that has the desired ornamental characteristics. If you eliminate the top plant, you will have eliminated the part of the plant with the most desirable ornamental characteristics.

Once you have the appropriate information on the structure and habit of your plant materials, and you have determined the appropriate timing to meet your pruning goals - you are ready to pick up that nicely sharpened, disinfected pruning tool. As you stand in readiness before your shrub and before you begin cutting, take a very good look at the shrub. First – take notice of any braches that are dead or out of sync with the overall shape of the shrub. Remove those with a nice cut made somewhat perpendicular to the ground surface. It is very important that you get close to, but do not cut through, the branch collar (this looks like a mock turtleneck on the branch joint). If you are removing only a portion of a branch you can determine where to make that cut by looking at the positions of the remaining buds on the branch. If the bud is on the outer side of the branch, facing outward, branch growth will be directed

outward. If the bud is facing the interior of the shrub, growth will be encouraged in that direction. When making a pruning cut, angle the blade at about 45 – 60 degrees, following the angle of the bud, about ¼” above the nearest bud growing in the direction you want the branch to grow. Now, look again at the shrub. Any crossing or rubbing branches will be detrimental to the strength of the overall structure and they may be causing open wounds on the branches. Any continually rubbed wounds will not callous over and become open invitations for insect and disease problems. Remove at least one of them to alleviate the rubbing problem. If you notice any branches that have puzzling symptoms or potential disease issues, you may want to have a professional look at them before you do any pruning. Proper care will help to prevent the inadvertent spread of any problems.

You have taken the first steps into the world of shrub pruning. Once you have gotten to this point, the rest becomes much easier. After the initial pruning cuts made for plant health, the rest of the pruning exercise is for shape, growth, and control. Most plants are very forgiving – and they will be more appreciative for a bit of care than complete neglect. Give pruning a whirl. You may be surprised with how satisfying it is.