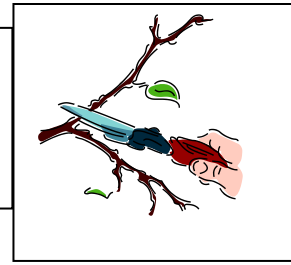


PRUNING OF TREES AND SHRUBS SHOULD BE DONE IN LATE WINTER

By Jennifer Schutter



Most trees and shrubs can only be pruned at certain times of year, usually when they are dormant. Late February or March is the best time to prune ornamental shade trees and fruit trees. Shrubs that flower in the spring such as the lilac or forsythia should only be pruned after flowering, while shrubs that flower later in the summer should only be pruned in early spring.

Pruning should be done for a purpose. It involves removing diseased or insect-infested wood and removing crossing and rubbing branches. Dead limbs, wind damage or overhanging limbs that are a threat to a house are also reasons that justify pruning of trees. Pruning can best be used to encourage trees to develop a strong structure and reduce the likelihood of damage during severe weather. Removing broken or damaged limbs encourage wound closure.

With younger trees, the goal of pruning is to help it develop a true leader branch, a main stem growing straight up that defines the tree's vertical structure. Your task then is to define the strongest, most vertical of the branches and head back (cut short) any others that threaten to sap the leader's food and energy. On main branches other than the leader branch, you'll also want to define the main growth, and head back the smaller branches growing off those.

Many home fruit growers make the mistake of planting a tree, then neglecting it until it begins to bear. But careful attention to pruning and training young trees will ultimately determine their productivity and longevity. Good pruning and training will also prevent later injury from weak crotches that break under snow or fruit load.

Before pruning a shrub, you should first decide what you want to accomplish. As with trees, you should remove any dead or crossing branches. Most shrubs do require occasional thinning, especially older ones. When you thin a shrub, you remove the oldest branches right down to the ground. That opens the center of the shrub to sunlight, encouraging new branch growth and increased leaf production throughout the shrub. The key is to remove those branches totally. Many homeowners never really thin their shrubs, relying instead on periodic shearing of the branch ends. That encourages heavy leaf production at the branch ends, which prevents adequate leaf production inside the shrub and results in leggy shrubs with long bare stems and dense surface growth.

Homeowners also sometimes prune trees to limit their size, especially those growing under power lines. This method of control is unfortunate and can be devastating to the tree. It is more preferable to select a low-growing tree if it is to be planted near or under a power line. That way, they won't need to be pruned. Home-owners should consider the mature size of a tree when planting one near a house or building.

Tree "topping" is the non-selective cutting of all the branches of the tree. It can be as non-invasive as reducing the length of all the tree limbs or as extreme as only leaving the trunk of the tree and some short branches of the main trunk. There is never a good time for topping. Some people believe topping concentrates the vigor of the tree into a reduced area but actually the opposite happens. The limbs that rapidly grow back are weaker and more vulnerable to damage. Topping also exposes larger limb cuts to insects, disease and rot. A homeowner is effectively reducing the life of the tree by topping it. The tree may live for many years afterward, but its life will be shortened over the genetic potential of the tree, had topping not occurred.

For more information on pruning contact Jennifer Schutter at 660-665-9866.