

Pruning Shrubs for Maximum Flower Power

Spring explodes with color, making this season one of the best times of the year. Bright, colorful blooms fill our senses and remind us of the renewal that spring brings. Unfortunately, this colorful display never lasts long enough. Although lamented, the end of a shrub's flowering cycle signifies the time to prune. For non-flowering shrubs, early spring may be just the time to break out the clippers, and for all shrubs, variety will determine how you need to prune.

Shrubs that flower in the spring are normally pruned immediately after flowering. Examples of these types of shrubs include: forsythia, Vanhoutte spirea, quince, lilac, and mockorange.

Pruning these shrubs during the dormant season, prior to blooming, does not harm the health of the plant, but it does remove the developing flower buds. For maximum floriferousness—yes that's a real word—prune after flowering has ceased.

Shrubs that bloom on the current season's growth, or that do not produce ornamental flowers, are best pruned in late winter to early spring. Examples of these include: Rose of Sharon, Japanese spirea, butterfly bush, blue mist spirea and burning bush euonymus.

Pruning these shrubs during the spring allows wounds to heal quickly without significant threat from insects or diseases. There is no need to treat pruning cuts with paints or sealers. None of these products help the plant recover and some may actually slow the healing process.

It is important to note whether the plant is coniferous (juniper, pine, spruce). If you cut a conifer, it may not grow back. Conifers do not have dormant buds on older wood, so they do not re-sprout behind pruning cuts.

Once you have determined when to prune, you must then determine how to prune. There are three basic methods used in pruning shrubs:

Thinning is used to thin out branches from a shrub that is too dense. It is accomplished by removing most of the inward growing twigs by either cutting them back to a larger branch, or cutting them back to just above an outward facing bud. On a multi-stemmed shrub, the oldest branches may be completely removed. Shrubs that respond well to thinning include: forsythia, lilac, crapemyrtle and bayberry. Many shrubs benefit from a combination of heading back and thinning cuts.

Heading back is removing the end of a branch by cutting it back to a bud. It is used to reduce the height of the shrub, or to keep it compact. Branches are not cut back to a uniform height, as this will result in a "witches' broom" effect. Instead, cut the branches back at random heights similar to that of the natural shrub shape prior to pruning. As you prune, cut back to a bud in the direction you wish new growth to go. Shrubs that can benefit from this pruning method include: azaleas, roses and junipers.

Rejuvenation, or renewal pruning is the most severe type of pruning and is normally done during the dormant season. It is used on a multi-stemmed shrub that has become too large with many old branches. All the stems are cut back to 3 to 5 inches above the ground. If you wish a more compact,

fuller shrub, prune off the tips of the new growth when it reaches 6-12 inches long. Flowering shrubs normally do not flower the year following renewal pruning. If your shrub has outgrown its space but is known not to recover from a rejuvenation pruning, it is time to remove and replace with a newer plant. Most conifers, including junipers and pines do not respond well to rejuvenation pruning. Rejuvenation works well for: spirea, forsythia, lilac, barberry, scarlet firethorn, viburnum, weigela, yew, ninebark, mockorange, shrub roses, and quince.

Shearing shrubs is not considered a proper method of pruning. Shearing should only be done on formal hedges in the landscape.

Spring temperatures and rainfall make this a great time to prune many shrubs. Remember, no amount of pruning can make up for a large shrub in a too small space. Always start with proper variety selection and use cultural practices like pruning only for maintenance.

Today, April 7th from 9:30 am-10:30 am is a free Compost Demonstration hosted by our Shawnee County Extension Master Gardeners. Stop by the Extension Master Gardener Vegetable Demonstration Garden located near the locomotive (look for the bright blue garden mural) at the south end of the Expocentre parking lot, 1 Expocentre Drive.