



A Pruning Guide

As landscapers and horticulturalist pruning is a very important part of our work. Most horticulturists are passionate about pruning. Most people enjoy pruning and believe in their methods. The question is how do you know what's right? Pruning should be more than just removing branches. Before you start you need to ask a few important questions that lead to a specific plan.

The Intent? what am I trying to accomplish with this particular plant? It can be as simple as removing dead or as complicated as espalier. Do you want the plant look attractive when the pruning is complete or will it take time to respond to the pruning? What are my aesthetic expectations? Intent is the easiest question but you need an answer before you begin.

The Species? Will this particular plant respond well to my Intent? This is the most difficult question. It requires strong knowledge of the plants you work with and experience of how each species reacts to pruning.

The Timing? what is the best time of the year? The general rule is if you are going to prune something aggressively the best time of year is late winter/ early spring. The idea is that you are capturing all the energy the plant is generating to push new growth. This energy is channeled to react to the wounding. This pruning leaves the plant with a more natural shape from late spring through the end of the year.

The classic example aggressive pruning is rejuvenation or basal pruning. Cutting down stocks of shrubs to get new sprouts from the base of the plant. This is very species specific but it can "rejuvenate" old plants. This is best done in March or April depending on the winter, January and February are a great time of year to prune most deciduous plants especially large trees but not a good time to prune most evergreens.

If your intent is to have the least reaction or sprouting the best time of year to prune is late summer and fall. If you prefer plants to have a manicured appearance then schedule pruning in the summer and early fall. The plants will have this neater look until late spring next year when the new growth emerges.

People always ask about losing flower buds and fruit. This should be a lower priority because you want to manage the plant with a longer view than one season. I've seen to many plants become leggy and un kempt by people overly concerned by one season's blossom.

The Amount? How much can I remove at once? Some plants lend themselves to aggressive pruning and some plants do not like to be pruned. You should prune a sugar maple very differently than a silver maple.

How often will I need to prune this plant to achieve my intent. The more formal your objective is the more pruning required. For example; espalier. Bonsai and topiaries will require frequent pruning throughout the year. Once I have the desired result what is the pruning schedule going forward? These decisions require a basic understanding of the particular plant. This prompts another question; Do I have the time and resources to commit to my intent? Do not start something that will require multiple prunings if you cannot stay the course.

Over pruning is worse than not pruning at all. Timing and species are critical to the amount. A general rule is to not remove more than 25% of the foliage. Most of the time that is a good rule but there are instances when less or more is appropriate

The Condition? If the plants health is compromised pruning may further stress the plant and possibly kill it. Old age, insects, disease, shade drought stress can all cause a plant to be vulnerable. Reducing the plants' ability to photosynthesize when its compromised is not smart.

You need to have a specific plan for each plant because there are so many factors to consider but using the pruning decision process provides a guide. These rules are pragmatic but not set in stone. Pruning is a mix of science and art. The most important thing to consider is that you are wounding the plant. How will this plant react? As you know plants can be forgiving and a big part of learning is trial and error. Like most things people have their bias about their pruning style. This is wonderful and we should always be open to learning and debate. However, there are a few important things that should not be compromised. Making the proper pruning cuts separates the professionals from the posers. As I mentioned before pruning is wounding the plants. It is imperative that these wounds are made in the best possible manner. Plants do not heal they continually grow and that is how they close the wound. Leaving stubs or cutting into the stem you are pruning back to should be avoided. Plants are forgiving but making the proper pruning cut promotes healthier plants. Since the accuracy is so important to a proper cut it is important to use good, sharp pruning tools. Felco* makes a wide variety of hand snips and saws. They can be expensive but are worth the investment.

Safety is the most important thing. Work on plants that you can prune safely. Ladders, pruning tools, weather, terrain, bees' nests and many other factors make pruning potentially dangerous. Make sure to use the proper personal protective equipment. Gloves, safety glasses, hardhat and hearing protection when appropriate shall be used. Think in terms of what can go wrong. Have a plan that allows for the safest way to do the work. This is your most important priority. There is so much more that can be discussed and written. This is a simple guide to help you start the process. The best way to learn is by doing. Pruning is a very important maintenance practice and it can be rewarding. When you set a goal using the pruning decision process and it comes to fruition you know you have created something special. It gives you a sense of pride seeing a beautiful healthy plant because of your work. Isn't that ultimately why we work with plants?

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