



Pruning Tips and Techniques

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For some plants in your landscape, now is a great time to start pruning to get them back into shape. This week I want to go over a few techniques and tips to help you in keeping your plants healthy and well-manicured.

Before ever pruning, you should consider your weapon of choice. Most pruning tasks in the home landscape can be done using hand pruners, lopping shears, pruning saws, pole pruners or hedge shears. To keep all pruning tools in good shape, sharpen and oil their blades at the end of each season. When sharpening loppers, hedge shears and scissor-action hand shears, sharpen only the outside surfaces of the blades so the inside surfaces remain flat and slide smoothly against one another. It is best to have pruning saws sharpened by a professional. Oil blades by wiping them with a cloth saturated in household oil, and treat wooden handles with linseed oil.

We should also understand the botanical principals behind pruning and what happens within the plant when pruned. The bud that sits at the end of a branch or twig, known as the terminal bud, produces a plant hormone known as auxin that directs the growth of lateral buds (buds along the sides of a stem or twig). As long as the terminal bud is intact, growth along the lateral buds will be suppressed. Removing the terminal bud through pruning allows for this secondary growth to start, with the most vigorous growth occurring within 6-8 inches of the cut. When making cuts, you should cut back to the appropriate lateral bud or branch without leaving too much of a stub. The distance from the bud to the cut affects the rate of healing, so leaving a stub will leave the plant open to insect or disease damage for a longer period of time.

Especially in regards to shrubs, excessive pruning, known as shearing, can cause excessive growth and will lead to a dense outer layer of foliage that prevents light from reaching the interior of the plant and making it appear twiggy or hollow. In the case of shrubs, it is usually better to cut out selected branches by pruning them back to a lateral bud or branch. This thinning will create new growth while also letting more light reach interior branches and provide a fuller, healthier plant.

When you remove large limbs from trees, the bark along the main trunk may strip or tear due to the weight of the falling limb. Avoid damaging the bark by making a "jump cut," which consists of three separate cuts. First, cut about one-fourth to one-half way through the lower side of the limb about a foot from the main trunk. Then make a second cut on top of the limb a few inches away from the first cut. Remove the remaining stub by cutting it back to the branch collar.

Research shows that wound dressing compounds do not promote healing or protect a wound from decay, regardless of the size of the cut. Aesthetically, wound dressings may have some merit, but if you prune properly, the wound heals rapidly and you do not need a wound dressing.

As a general rule, plants that flower before May should be pruned after they bloom, while those that flower after May are considered summer-flowering and can be pruned just prior to spring growth. One exception to this rule is the oakleaf hydrangea, a summer-flowering shrub that forms flower buds the previous season. Another exception is late-flowering azalea cultivars, which bloom during May, June or even July. Prune both the oakleaf hydrangea and the azalea cultivars after they bloom.

This information will get you started on keeping your plants pruned, pretty, and prosperous. For some specific plants, more information on pruning is available. We've got great information available at the Extension office for you on this and lots of other topics. Give us a call at 706-795-2281, visit our website at www.caes.uga.edu/extension/madison, or follow us on Facebook at "Madison County Ga Agriculture."