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POINTERS FOR PERFECT PRUNING

To prune or not to prune ... that is often the question. The answer is a guarded "yes." Some pruning may be done year round depending on the plants and the type of pruning. Deciding when and what to prune is easier if you understand the why and how of the pruning process.

WHY PRUNE

There are three primary reasons to prune:

1. To remove dead and diseased branches
2. To control size and shape
3. To stimulate growth

PREFERRED PRUNING PERIODS

Pruning to remove diseased branches should be done as necessary in order to protect the plant.

Pruning to stimulate growth will be determined by the plant's characteristics and growing season. Spring-bloomers produce flowers on wood from the prior season. If you want a heavy flower growth next year, prune plants such as forsythia, azaleas, rhododendron, pieris, spirea, weigela, philadelphus (mockorange), and deutzia after the glory of their flowers have faded.

Summer-bloomers follow the opposite theory. Their flowers grow from new wood produced in the same season. A late-winter pruning of shrub roses, althea, rose of Sharon, hydrangea, and butterfly bush, as well as many fruit trees and berry bushes will encourage the growth of new wood and abundant flowers.

Needle evergreens, such as pine and spruce, also prefer a late winter/early spring trimming just before their spring growth spurt. Avoid fall pruning of these evergreens as it will stimulate growth which may not be able to harden off before winter's arrival.

Fall, however, is a good time to prune dead or diseased branches from the spring-flowering trees and shrubs. Late summer and fall blooming shrubs and perennials should also be trimmed once their flowers have fallen. If trees or shrubs are transplanted during the fall, cut back their twig-bearing branches approximately one-third to compensate for the roots that have been damaged. This will create less of a drain on the remaining root system and allow it to rebuild.

Heavy pruning is generally best done when the plant is dormant and temperatures are above freezing. This will create less of a shock to the plant, and will not be a signal for the plant to grow. The bare branches of winter also provide a good view of the plant's shape and problem areas.

Also, many flowering shrubs (forsythia, lilac, and spirea) need rejuvenation every several years in order to produce flowers abundantly. If the plant is several years old, remove about one-third of the old branches to the ground level. During each of the next two years, remove another one-third of the branches, while at the same time pruning any water sprouts that have developed. (See Fig. 1) If the plant is not too old, the branches can be cut to within two to three inches of the ground. Any water sprout development will need pruning to encourage branching. Once the plant is under control, the annual removal of non-essential plant parts will keep the plant in good appearance and in vigorous growth. (See Fig. 1)

WHERE TO CUT

Never make a random cut along a branch. Cutting in the middle of a branch will cause the branch to wither beyond the bud providing a home for insects and disease. Try to select a bud pointing outward or in the direction you want new growth to follow. Cutting back to a bud or branch will stimulate growth at this point. If a branch to be removed is over one inch in diameter, use more than one cut. (See Fig. 2) If only one cut is used, there is danger of tearing the bark well below the branch leaving a large needless wound.

When pruning, do not just remove the branch tips to give a sheared effect unless working with a formal hedge. Each species will also have its own natural form and this should be maintained. Pruning can supplement the form, but don't prune to destroy it. Remove dead and dying branches, suckers that arise from below the ground, water sprouts that arise from the wood above the ground, any crossover branches, duplicate branching including multiple leaders, and one of two branches forming a V crotch. (See Fig. 1)

HOW TO CUT

Use tools that are sharp and large enough for the job. Keep the cut as small as possible and avoid "tearing" the branch as mentioned previously. Try to cut on a 45 degree angle with the lowest part of the cut directly opposite and slightly above the bud or branch of your pruning point.

Try not to over prune, but don't be afraid of cutting. Pruning may never be perfect, but it will always help produce a healthy and lush plant.

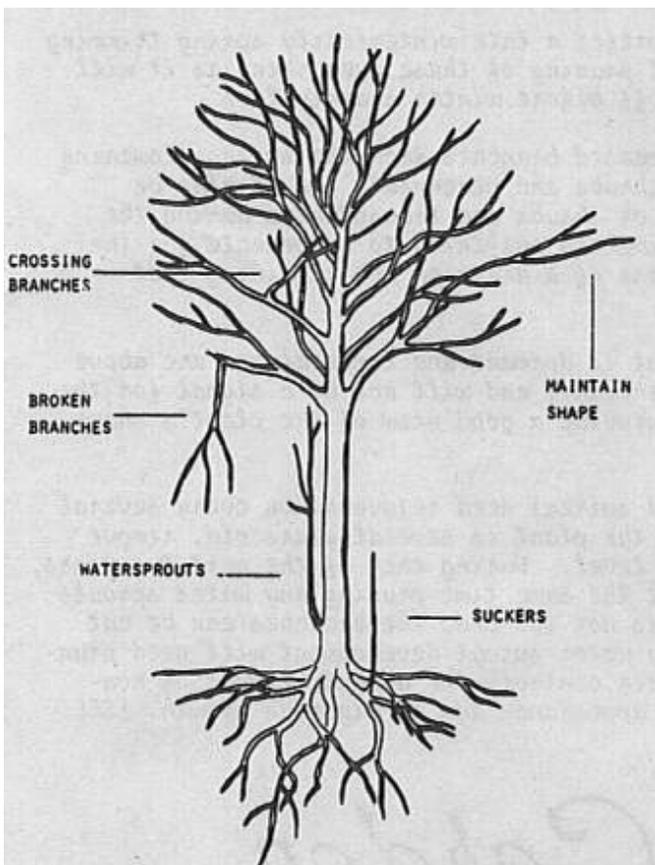


Fig. 1

Prune to remove dead or dying branches, suckers, water sprouts, cross-over or broken branches, multiple leaders and to maintain natural shape.

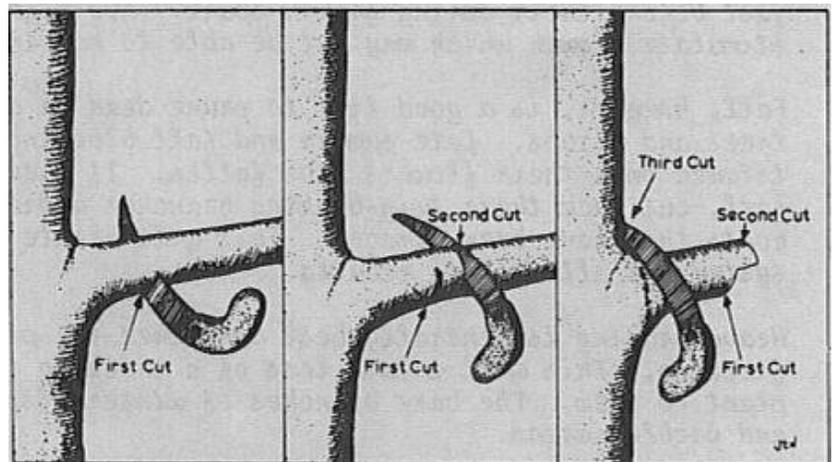


Fig. 2

To Prevent bark tearing when removing large branches, use a series of three cuts.



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one flower at a time.*