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**Pruning and Training Trees and Shrubs**

**By Alan Jolliffe**

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PRUNING AND TRAINING GARDEN SHRUBS

"The Art and Science of Pruning"

By Alan Jolliffe

Pruning is the art of training plants. Pruning is not an end in itself. Pruning is a stimulus for desirable plant growth.

Introduction.

Very few publications on pruning mention the relationship between pruning and training when explaining how to prune all types of plants, particularly of garden shrubs. This relationship is vital and must be well understood by gardeners, unfortunately it is not. Often pruning and training is not well practiced in both public and private gardens. However pruning, and therefore training, is one of those garden arts which must be practiced – and practice makes perfect.

Pruning is both an art and science, but there is now a lot more science than art and that is not a good thing. Pruning is becoming a lost art and it needs to be revived before it is lost altogether. The training of young plants is more important than the control of old plants or the regeneration of old plants. Young plants are very easily trained from the time they are planted out in the garden.

Of all the jobs in the garden nothing causes so much controversy and worry as does pruning.

Why do we prune?

- To grow large blooms for exhibition or fun using all the plant's vigor.
- To train the plant to best suit the position we planted it in.
- To remove the dead and diseased wood from the plant.
- To keep the plant in proportion for the position in which it is growing.
- To ensure maximum air and sunlight reach all parts of the plant.

## Pruning and Training Trees and Shrubs

To enable the best features of the plant to be shown off in the garden.

Tools of the trade.

The first priority is to make sure your pruning tools are clean and sharp. The basic tools are secateurs and a hand pruning saw. Loppers are alright but can be an unnecessary expense. Secateurs are used to cut branches up to 20mm in diameter after that you can use a saw without doing any harm to the branch. A hand saw can cut quite large diameter branches without difficulty. In fact far too many people use a chainsaw when they do not have to and a chainsaw is very dangerous in these situations. They are also slower by the time you get them started and make the cut, a handsaw is faster and better exercise!

Starting to prune.

Always start pruning from the top down. One of the most common mistakes is to remove the weaker shoots at the bottom of the shrub thus creating a clear stem sometimes many centimeters off the ground. (These are then 'standard' shrubs). Starting at the top allows you to shape the plant more easily. You can see the plant and get a much better idea of the shrub when finished.

Look for what I call the 'inner shape'. On many shrubs it is possible to see an outline of foliage smaller than the existing shrub. Removal of the foliage back to this shape is then a relatively easy matter. It is the identification of the inner shape that allows you, the artist and gardener, to quickly and easily complete the pruning of any tree or shrub. You will know what you are aiming to achieve and that makes the task easier.

Once cut you cannot put the plant pieces back on the plant so don't cut back too far. It is just as easy to come back and take some more material off rather than be disappointed.

Hiding pruning cuts.

One of the hardest things to do is to hide the pruning cut. Impossible? Well maybe. The visual impact of cuts can be lessened dramatically by changing the angle of the cut and the position of the cut. If possible always make the cut beside an existing side shoot so the end does not look like it has been cut off. Try to face the cuts upwards or towards the centre of the plant or towards the back of the border.

Pick those flowers.

The easiest and most rewarding pruning anyone can do is to pick the flowers for indoor display or to give away. This way flowers can be appreciated in the garden and inside the house. Cutting flowers off at the correct pruning position will save additional pruning time later on.

Pruning times.

Confusion often reigns about the time to prune many plants. A simple rule is this; "Prune After Flowering". There is no need to remember which plants need pruning in which months. Pruning after flowering means that dead flowers are removed, unwanted fruit is not produced and new shoots are encouraged to grow. Spring flowering plants are a good example because it is easy to see how this is applied. Similarly with summer flowering plants.

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With plants that are tender and likely to be frosted over winter just consider the dormant period of winter as a "short" period. Fuchsias, for example, flower in late summer, are frost tender in winter, and make growth in spring. During the dormant period of winter no growth takes place. Therefore to prune in spring does not effect the growth of the plant. The rule therefore still applies "prune after flowering".

Pruning after flowering allows the plant to take the longest possible time to lay down new shoots and buds for the next flowering season.

Summer pruning.

Most of the training will occur in the summer not the winter. Summer pruning and training requires care and knowledge. Young vigorous growth can be removed to encourage branching at a lower height in the same season. It may be possible to prune the same shoots twice or even tree times during the summer. This encourages the plant to mature earlier and at a smaller size, producing flowers and fruit earlier in its life.

Root pruning.

Root pruning is not practiced very much. It can be a very effective way to slow down growth of very vigorous plants.

No pruning.

Not all plants require pruning and the same plant growing in different places may require different pruning to achieve the required garden shape. Always consider the individual, plant and its character and its position in the garden.

If you do not like pruning then choose plants that don't require pruning.

Final Advice

Pruning is not a once a year job. People often regard pruning as a once a year activity. Don't be fooled by the fact that some other people use pruning as an excuse for a mid-winter or spring cleanup. Think of the plants – they are individuals too and require individual treatment.

The only way to become a competent pruner is to practice pruning, observe the results, correct your techniques and practice. Remember practice makes perfect.

Alan Jolliffe is a garden writer and lecturer. I am available to write special articles for you about Gardening and about New Zealand. I am a professional horticulturist, recreation manager, tourism advisor, teacher and local government manager. Contact [jolliffe@slingshot.co.nz](mailto:jolliffe@slingshot.co.nz)

### **Planting And Care Of Shrubs**

**By Paul Curran**

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## Pruning and Training Trees and Shrubs

In general, trees and shrubs are planted and cared for in the same way, the difference between them being chiefly one of height. One definition of the difference, however, is that while a tree has only one trunk, a shrub has several stems or trunks.

Not so long ago the number of reliable shrubs was quite limited, but today the many new hybrids have lengthened the list and the gardener's choice is almost endless. No matter the region, it is now possible to plant shrubs that will satisfy color needs, bloom at various seasons, cover bare spots where grass won't grow, or grow in such profusion and depth that screening purposes are served.

Shrubs are valuable to the gardener because they bridge the gap between trees and flowers. As do trees, they serve as boundary markers, soften the lines of buildings, act as a decorative background for flower beds and hide unsightly views.

Like flowers, they add character and shape to the garden, blooming forth with colorful blossoms and attracting birds with their berries. One big item in their favor is that they mature rapidly, yet remain as hardy and long-lived as trees.

Planting of shrubs is little different from planting of trees. Early spring is the most favorable time since it gives the plant a long spell of good growing weather to get reestablished. In the milder sections of the country, however, transplanting may be done through the winter months. In New England, evergreens may be planted in September and May, and deciduous shrubs in October and May.

Dry roots are the chief cause of planting failures, and steps should be taken to prevent this—i.e., balling and burlapping, and heeling in. After receiving shrubs from a nursery, water as soon as possible; shade them from sunshine at first, mulch the ground around them, and prune back severely.

The older the plant you get, the more severely it will have to be cut back, so that in the long run, you come out just as well buying the less expensive, smaller shrubs. Forsythia and azalea may be moved while in flower, but most plants should not.

Watering in the fall, before the ground freezes, is important for box, azalea, rhododendron, mountain laurel and broadleaf evergreens, whose leaves lose moisture in winter.

## Pruning and Training Trees and Shrubs

Pruning of shrubs helps to keep them young and vigorous. Rather than cutting all branches off to an even length, prune out the older branches, even though they may be sound. With lilacs, for example, use a keyhole saw, and cut as close to the ground as possible, cutting out the oldest stems.

Some shrubs need pruning every year, especially those which have dead branches as a result of winterkill. (These include some deutzias, hydrangeas, buddleia, spireas and privets.) Other shrubs such as rhododendron, azaleas, magnolia and buddleia should have the flower heads pruned off after blooming.

Paul Curran is CEO of Cuzcom Internet Publishing Group and webmaster at [Trees-and-Bushes.com](http://Trees-and-Bushes.com), providing access to their nursery supplier for a range of quality plants, trees, bushes, shrubs, seeds and garden products.



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