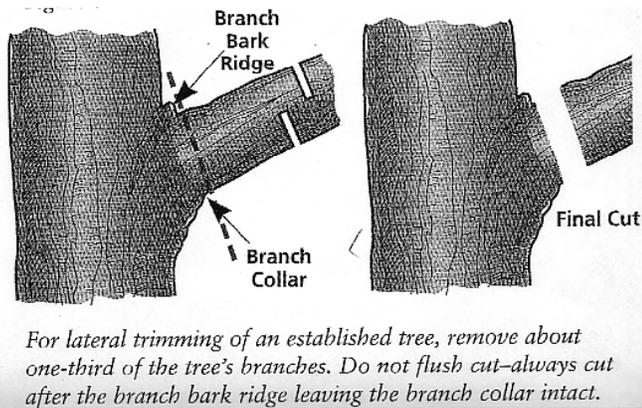


SHADE TREE COMMITTEE



SIMPLE PRUNING TIPS

Are you confused about pruning? There is no need to be. The rules are simple and make sense. Pruning of shade trees is best left to arborists (make sure they are Certified Tree Experts in NJ—call 732-833-0325). Don't even think of climbing a ladder with a saw! Homeowners can safely try their hand at small ornamental trees and shrubs. How a plant is pruned is more important than timing.

Pruning skills can be easily learned. If you remove a branch, regardless of its size, the cut must be made just outside a branch collar. The branch collar is a ring around the base of the branch, just outside a crusty ridge in the crotch between branches. If you cut branches at the ends to shorten them, new shoots will sprout where you cut. So find a bud facing away from the trunk, or the center of the shrub, and cut just beyond it. If you shorten a branch on a plant with opposite leaves pinch off the inward-facing bud.

Dead, broken and diseased branches should be removed as soon as noticed. Some pests can also be caught in time by careful pruning. How to tell if a branch is alive? Dead branches are dull gray and will snap. Live branches bend and show green when nicked. Try this on stressed plants that leaf out late, or those that leaf out late naturally, such as franklinia. If you must remove lower branches on a tree for clearance retain the proportion of 1/3 clear trunk to 2/3 leaf canopy.

Early blooming shrubs and trees can be pruned just after flowering. If you want twigs for forcing and do not mind losing some blossoms later in the spring, you can start as soon as flowering buds swell in late winter.

Late blooming shrubs and trees, shrubs grown just for foliage and shade trees are best pruned while they are dormant, that is before they leaf out.

Most trees and shrubs have naturally good form and do not require any pruning, aside from some dead or crossing branches, stray shoots and suckers coming from the base of the tree. Unless you are interested in elaborate work, such as topiary, you need not invest much time in pruning. You can even make an excellent hedge of shrubs that requires no trimming. There is a shrub of just the right shape and height for every need. No one should struggle to fight a plant poorly chosen for its job, or planted too close to the house.

Pruning can be used to encourage bloom in some fast growing shrubs. They can be coaxed to bloom more profusely with regular pruning. Forsythia, spirea, weigela come to mind. One often sees them formed into oversize meatballs. These shrubs are best pruned by removing about a third of the oldest branches at the ground level. Such pruning maintains the graceful shape, and results in somewhat reduced height.

Neglected shrubs can be rejuvenated and brought back to flower by gradual removal of the oldest stems at the ground level.

Exceptions. There are some exceptions to the general rules. Red (or yellow) stemmed dogwood is grown for its bright bark. Untouched, it develops mostly grey branches with colorful short tips and some young shoots in between. It needs to be cut down to about a foot from the ground every spring, before the leaf buds break. This forces the shrub to grow all new twigs, which exhibit the most brilliant color in winter. There is a price to pay for these fireworks—a shorter life span. If this is a concern, you can try to cut it down every third year, and in other years remove a third of the oldest branches.

The practice of cutting down to the ground level in early spring is also used for shrubs of rather impermanent nature, such as buddleia or caryopteris.

Tree paint for new cuts is no longer recommended. Plants produce their own defense substances to wall off injury, such as a cut. Air is also needed to speed this process. The cuts will become gray on their own soon enough.

When it's too late for pruning. If more than half of a shrub's stems are dead and the live stems show poor vigor, it may be time to give up and replace the shrub. It's a good idea to plant a different species in the same spot. The soil may be depleted and it may also harbor a disease or fungus which affected the original plant.