

### Top Pruning Tips

Without a doubt, pruning is the one garden task that I see done wrong most frequently. I have observed countless pruning hack jobs that have resulted in plant decline or death. Each time I see such a spectacle, I shake my head and wish dearly that I could confiscate all pruning tools from the individual who perpetrated the pruning misdemeanor.

Unfortunately, we live in a polite society where doing such would result in my own criminal record. So, the best I can do is hope and pray that these individuals attend my classes or read my many rants on the topic. Pruning a plant properly can improve overall health, longevity, flowering potential, and structural soundness. The exact opposite occurs when it is done wrong. Bad pruning often leads to poor structural soundness, an increased risk for insect and disease infestation, and less floral potential in flowering plants.



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(A proper pruning cut made just outside the branch collar, photo by J. Stefanski)

When I teach classes, the first topic I always discuss is pruning tools. Having the right tool for the job is essential. My standard pruning kit consists of a good pair of Felco brand hand pruners, a pruning saw, a pair of loppers, and a telescoping pruning lopper/saw combo. The most important tool I use is my hand pruners. I have used Felco brand hand pruners for many years and they will last for many more. Buy a good pair on the front end and it will save you money in the long run. Notably, one common pruning tool is absent from my kit, and these are pruning shears. Shearing plants is not a desirable

method of pruning and often causes harmful cuts to be made that don't heal properly and result in poor plant health and growth. Every pruning cut I make is done by hand to ensure that they heal properly which helps to maintain a healthy plant with the desired growth and shape that I desire.

Next, let's discuss why we prune in the first place. For most folks, we prune because we want our trees and shrubs to maintain a desired size or shape. While this is very important, there are other reasons why we should be pruning. I always tell my class participants to look for the three D's, which are dead, damaged or diseased limbs. Any limb that looks broken due to wind or weather should be removed properly to ensure healing of the wound. Also, if you see the signs of insect infestation or other non-healthy-looking tissue, removing it is very important in stopping the spread of any pests. The next primary reason for pruning is to ensure that the plant receives ample sunlight and airflow. For many flowering trees and shrubs, pruning is essential to maximize floral bud production. When canopy growth

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becomes too dense, interior buds tend to go dormant due to a lack of sunlight. Also, if airflow and sunlight are decreased, this creates the perfect conditions for disease to occur. Keep an eye out for any limbs growing into the center of the canopy, removing these will help to open up space for sunlight and air movement. The next best reason for pruning is to maintain a desired shape and size. This leads me to point out one of the most fundamental horticultural rules, which is planting the right plant in the right place. Just because a plant is small at planting doesn't mean it's going to stay that way. Trying to keep a 25 ft. tall crape myrtle pruned back to eight feet every year is a lost cause. The best thing to do is dig it up and put an appropriately sized plant in its place. Be sure to read tags and labels carefully before adding plants to your home landscape. This will certainly help you save time and money, eliminate potential back injuries, and avoid possible marital strife as a result of your poor planting choices. Just read the tags, they are there for a reason!

The two most important things to remember when pruning, is doing it at the appropriate time and making a proper pruning cut. For most trees and shrubs, pruning in late winter just as buds begin to swell but before they break dormancy, is recommended. This is when plants have the most stored energy and when recovery conditions are ideal. The only exception to this rule is flowering plants that bloom before July 1st. For these plants, it is ok to wait until after they flower to prune them. Making the proper pruning cut is absolutely the single most important thing you need to do when pruning. Improper cuts will not heal and often lead to other problems. If you look carefully at any branch or limb, you will notice a slightly swollen area right where the branch meets its parent limb. This area is known as the branch collar and contains the cells that form scabs that will heal over any pruning wounds. Cutting into this tissue will remove these cells, while cutting too far away will result in the dieback of that limb all the way back to the branch collar. This results in dead nubs which often break away in time, leading to open wounds that never heal. Ideally, all cuts should be made just outside this branch collar. Doing so, will ensure a properly healed wound. This principle applies to any limb, branch, or stem, regardless of size.

While pruning can be intimidating for some, with practice and patience, doing it properly will become second nature. Remember to look for the three D's, remove overcrowded interior growth, and make the proper cut at the appropriate time of year. To learn more about pruning, you can sign up for my upcoming pruning class, which will take place on March 9th from 9:30-11:00 am and will be held at the Lane Agripark complex located at 315 John R. Rice Blvd. in Murfreesboro. This class is free and open to the public. For more details and to register, please call our office at 615-898-7710 or visit our website, [rutherford.tennessee.edu](http://rutherford.tennessee.edu). For questions or comments, please feel free to contact me at the office number above or by email, [jski@utk.edu](mailto:jski@utk.edu).

Happy Pruning!