

Pruning the Right Way

For many homeowners, pruning can feel more like guesswork than good gardening. When a tree begins to look overgrown or a shrub starts blocking a walkway, the instinct is often to grab the nearest pair of pruning shears and start cutting, ala Edward Scissor Hands. This method, however, is strongly discouraged by the author. While pruning may seem straightforward, the way it is done has a lasting impact on a plant's health, structure, and safety. Thoughtful pruning strengthens trees and shrubs, while poor pruning can weaken them for years and create unnecessary hazards in the landscape



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Pruning serves several important purposes beyond appearance. Removing problem branches improves airflow and allows sunlight to reach deeper into the canopy, both of which help reduce disease pressure. This can also impact the number of blooms that develop on flowering trees and shrubs. Once sunlight is blocked out from interior limbs, those buds will no longer produce flowers, reducing the overall flowering of the plant. This is particularly impactful on fruit producing trees, where the entire goal is to eat the ripened juicy fruit at the end of the season. Proper pruning also encourages strong branch structure, making plants better able to withstand storms and heavy winds. In residential landscapes, proper pruning can prevent limbs from interfering with homes, vehicles, or pedestrians. Understanding that pruning is about guiding growth rather than simply reducing size helps homeowners make better decisions before making the first cut.

Timing is one of the most important factors in successful pruning, and it often determines how well a plant recovers. For most trees and shrubs, late winter to early spring is the ideal time to prune. During this dormant period, plants experience less stress and are able to heal quickly once new growth begins. Another advantage of pruning before leaves emerge is that branch structure is easy to see, making it simpler to identify problem limbs. Spring-flowering plants are an exception, as pruning too early can remove flower buds; these should be pruned shortly after they bloom. Examples of such plants include old wood blooming hydrangeas such as oakleaf or mophead types. These hydrangeas set flower buds the previous season, so any removal of limbs during dormancy will reduce the floral potential significantly as a result. Waiting till after they bloom to do any pruning is a sound choice when dealing with these hydrangeas.

Once the timing is right, knowing what to remove becomes the next step. Pruning should always begin with identifying the three D's, which are dead, diseased, or damaged branches, as these provide no benefit to the plant and can serve as entry points for insects or diseases. Branches that cross or rub against each other should also be removed, since repeated friction creates wounds that weaken trees over time. Inward-growing branches that crowd the center of the canopy limit airflow and sunlight and are often overlooked, yet removing them can dramatically improve a plant's overall health. Fast-growing shoots at the base of trees or straight up from branches may also appear vigorous, but they are weakly attached and should be removed early. Addressing these issues first creates a strong foundation before making any aesthetic decisions.

The tools used for pruning play an important role in how well plants recover. Small hand pruners are ideal for thin branches, while loppers handle medium-sized limbs more effectively. Larger branches require a pruning saw to make clean, controlled cuts. Regardless of the tool, sharp blades are essential. Dull tools crush and tear plant tissue, which slows healing and increases the risk of disease. Keeping tools clean is equally important, especially when pruning multiple plants. A quick wipe with rubbing alcohol between cuts can help prevent diseases from spreading through the landscape.

Equally important as the tool is where the cut is made. Every branch connects to the trunk or a larger limb at a slightly swollen area known as the branch collar. This area contains natural defense tissues that allow plants to seal wounds efficiently. Cuts should be made just outside this collar, avoiding flush cuts against the trunk or long stubs left behind. Properly placed cuts heal faster and reduce the chance of decay. Angling cuts slightly away from the trunk prevents water from collecting on the wound, which further protects the plant.

When removing larger branches, technique becomes even more critical. Cutting a heavy limb in a single motion often results in torn bark and large wounds. Instead, branches should be removed in stages by first cutting underneath to prevent tearing, then removing the bulk of the branch, and finally making a clean cut at the proper location. This is known as the three-cut method and should be used for any limbs over once inch in diameter. Taking the extra time to utilize this pruning technique protects the tree and results in a cleaner, safer outcome.

One pruning practice homeowners should avoid entirely is topping. Topping involves cutting large branches or the main leader straight across to reduce height. While it may appear to solve a problem quickly, it actually creates long-term issues. Topped trees respond by producing many fast-growing shoots that are weakly attached and prone to breaking. Large wounds left behind invite decay and pests, increasing the likelihood of failure during storms. Instead of topping, trees should be selectively pruned by removing specific branches in a way that preserves their natural shape and strength. Two of the most

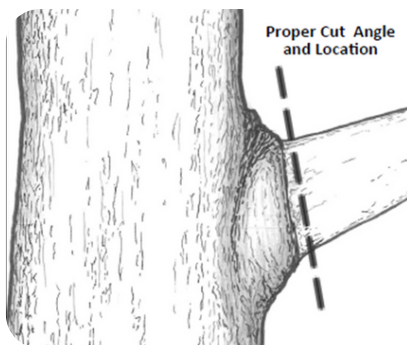
abused plants in our urban residential landscapes are Bradford pears and crape myrtles. They often get topped or butchered, causing long lasting damage and creating weak branching prone to splitting. Snarky horticulturalist like myself refer to crape myrtle toppings as ‘crape murder’.

Over-pruning is another common issue, especially when homeowners are eager to “clean up” their landscape. Removing too much foliage at once stresses plants and reduces their ability to produce energy. As a general guideline, no more than about one-quarter of a tree’s canopy should be removed in a single season. Routine shearing of shrubs can also cause problems by creating dense growth on the outside while leaving the interior bare and unhealthy. Selective pruning within the canopy leads to fuller, more natural plants that hold their shape longer.

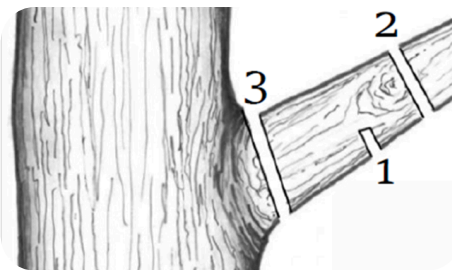
Pruning does not need to be complicated or intimidating. By focusing on problem branches, using the right tools, and making careful cuts in the proper location, homeowners can greatly improve the health and longevity of their trees and shrubs. When in doubt, it is always better to prune lightly and observe how a plant responds rather than cutting too aggressively. A few well-placed cuts made at the right time can prevent years of problems and help landscapes remain safe, attractive, and resilient well into the future.

Happy Pruning!

For questions or comments, please feel free to reach me at the UT/TSU Rutherford County Extension office. Our main office line is 615-898-7710 and my email is jski@utk.edu. Additionally, please check us out on the web at Rutherford.tennessee.edu to learn more about upcoming classes and all other Extension programming activities that we offer.



(Proper pruning location, hand drawing by J. Stefanski)



(Three-cut method for larger limbs, hand drawing by J. Stefanski)



(A properly pruning limb on a sycamore, photo J. Stefanski)