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Pruning plants in the landscape can be a daunting task for gardeners. How far back should they be pruned, when should I prune, and how do I prune, are frequent questions all county agents get. Pruning can be surprisingly simple if you can answer three basic questions. Why, when and how?

Having a reason to prune is the first question. Has the plant grown too large, is there diseased or damaged wood, does the plant need to be pruned to increase flowering, open it up to sunlight, or increase fruit set? Be aware of problems with branches hitting the roof or the house, brushing your car every time you back up out of your garage, or blocking visibility from oncoming pedestrians or traffic. Are there branches that are crossing through the plant or rubbing up against other branches, thus wounding them both? And lastly, do you like your plants in perfect round balls or boxes, or in spiral or topiary forms. These are all reasons why—some better than others!

Once you know why you are pruning, now determine WHEN you should prune. Chances are, you planted a flowering tree or shrub with hopes of having flowers. Knowing when a plant blooms will determine when it should be pruned. Plants that flower in the spring should be pruned as soon after flowering, but no later than June 15. Spring blooming plants starting with camellias and ending with mock orange—which includes azaleas, forsythia, flowering quince and many more, set their flower buds at the end of summer into early fall. We want to give our plants a chance to recover and bounce back after pruning. Typically after the middle of June, temperatures are heating up and we are getting less rain. We don't see much rapid new growth in the hot summer months.

Shrubs and trees which bloom in the summer with a few exceptions (big leaf hydrangeas, oakleaf hydrangeas and gardenias), bloom on the current season growth, so they should be pruned at the end of February through mid-March. This year our mild winter has had most plants a good two to three weeks ahead of schedule. Roses, buddleia (butterfly bush), and crape myrtles are all leafed out or almost there. Some roses even have a few blooms. If you have not pruned roses or butterfly bush, you really need to, or you won't have as many blooms this summer. While annual pruning is not needed on all shrubs, roses, buddleia and summer blooming spirea really do benefit from a severe hair cut every year at the end of February through mid-March. If left unpruned, the stems will get woodier and you will only have blooms on the tips of the branches. Pruning after they are fully leafed out is not going to hurt the plants, but it may delay the first blooms. Losing a few early blooms is preferable to having a gangly, less productive plant all growing season.

Crape myrtles do not need to be pruned every year, unless they are dwarf plants or young ones that have not gotten their shape yet. They should NEVER be pruned back to those ugly knobs each year, which is known as crape murder. We see so many examples of butchered crape myrtles all over the south. Know the mature size of the plant you are buying. There are dwarf forms from groundcover size to 3-5 feet at maturity all the way up to trees that can get 30 feet tall. If you are growing a standard

crape myrtle let it become the tree it was meant to be. Once you have it shaped, minimal pruning is ever needed.

Big leaf hydrangeas, oakleaf hydrangeas and gardenias don't follow the rules. These plants all bloom in the summer, but they set their flower buds at the end of the summer into early fall. If you prune them before growth begins, you will not have flowers this summer. The time to prune them is when the flowers begin to fade. Again, only prune if there is a need to.

Two other members of the hydrangea family are panicle and smooth hydrangeas, which include Limelight and Annabelle types. These varieties of hydrangeas bloom on the new growth so CAN be pruned in late February to mid-March without damaging flowers. Prune as little or as much as you want. It all depends on how large you want the plant to grow.

Shrubs that you are growing primarily for foliage—hollies, cleyera, boxwood and eleagnus can be pruned lightly at any season. If you plan to remove more than 1/3 of the plant, then try to get this severe pruning done in the February through mid-April time period to allow recovery time.

You have not answered why and when, now comes how. There are various forms of plant growth. Some shrubs have a main trunk that comes from the ground that all the branches are attached to. Other shrubs have multiple trunks known as canes with none being the most dominant or main trunk. Cane-producing shrubs include hydrangeas, nandina, spirea, abelia, buddleia, itea, forsythia and red and yellow twigged dogwoods. If you need to prune these plant you remove the older, woodier canes at the soil line. This is known as rejuvenation pruning. Cutting out these less productive stems, will encourage new and vibrant growth to come up from the ground up. Forsythia will bloom better if you remove 1/3 of the old canes every year after bloom. The older and woodier the plant gets, the less flowers you have. For some cane producing plants we do a combination of thinning and cutting back from the top. Buddleia and summer spirea benefit from shearing and thinning to keep them blooming. You can remove some of the thicker woodier stems at soil level, and then shear the rest of the plant back to keep it full and low to the ground. If you are growing a taller variety of buddleia you can prune less severely, but take it back by at least 1/2. If you are pruning cane-producing plants, the timing to do this type of pruning will be determined by when each type of plant blooms. For red and yellow twigged dogwoods, we are growing those for their bright red or yellow stems in the winter months. As growth begins in the spring and they leaf out, they are just another plant in the garden. The winter stems are more vibrant on young stems. The older and woodier their stems get, the less red or yellow color they have. Removing a third of their canes each spring will keep them prettier in the winter months.

Plants with a dominant trunk include azaleas, hollies, magnolias, camellias, boxwood, juniper and cleyera. If they need pruning there are two methods. The preferred method is selective thinning, where you remove specific branches to a node. You can actually direct where the new growth will grow to by pruning to a bud that is facing in that direction. These plants can also be pruned as hedges or sheared, but the resulting new growth will all be at the same level and so will most of the blooms. Selective thinning gives you a fuller and more natural look to the shrub than the meatball forms. Again timing is based on bloom time.

True hedges that are grown as a living fence should be pruned with hedge trimmers. Try to keep the top angle of the hedge slightly narrower than the bottom of the hedge to allow sunlight to reach the entire profile of the plant. If we keep the top too wide it can shade out the base which can affect the amount of leaves down low.

Now that you know why, when and how, make sure that you have the proper tools to do the job. Fit the size of the pruning tool to the job that is being done. Some plants can be pruned with hand pruners, while others need loppers, pruning saws or even chain saws. A nice clean cut is the best approach and sharp tools make that happen. Tree paints or wound dressings are not needed. If you are working in diseased plants, consider sterilizing your tools in between pruning cuts or you can transmit the diseases mechanically.

Plan your expected outcomes, and prune a little and evaluate as you go. You can always take off a few more branches if you think you need to, but you can't glue them back on once you have pruned them off. And if you have questions, call your local county extension office.