

HOME-GARDEN

Tips to make your winter pruning project for your garden a success

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I love pruning. Next to weeding, it's my favorite gardening task. My husband says I like to control my garden rather than tend it, but I like to think I'm shaping and guiding my plants to keep them healthy and allow them to grow to their full potential with beautiful structure.

Winter is the perfect season for pruning most trees and shrubs, and there are several practical reasons why. For deciduous trees and shrubs, you get a better picture of the structure of the plant after the leaves have fallen. This allows you to conduct structural pruning essential for the long-term health of the plant. Plus, when trees and shrubs are pruned in winter while dormant they recover more easily come spring when they are ready to push out new growth. Following a few rules of thumb will help make your pruning job a success.

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For trees, encourage one dominant stem. Two leaders competing to be the tallest are called "co-dominant stems," and generally, these create weaknesses that will fail when trees mature and limbs get heavy. To correct this, subordinate one of the leaders by pruning ideally when the tree is young. Choose the leader that is straighter and more centered and reduce the height of the competing leader a few feet. The taller one will grow stronger and thicker in a structure less likely to fail. At this time, you should also prune trees to remove rubbing, crossing limbs. As trees move in the wind, the spot where two limbs rub together will cause a wound, so these limbs should be pruned out as young as possible before they create too much damage.

With multi-stemmed shrubs, prune for shape and size and to remove diseased or broken limbs. Prune shrubs back to a node, the spot where you see a bud or leaf coming out of the stem. The hormones in the bud will cause a new stem to grow from that bud, so pay attention to which direction the bud is pointing because that is where the new growth will be.

Always research your plant before you cut. Some spring blooming woody shrubs like fetterbush (*Pieris* spp.), lilac (*Syringa* spp.), azalea (*Rhododendron* spp.), and witch-alder (*Fothergilla* spp.) bloom on "old wood," or last year's growth. Winter is not the time to prune these because you will cut off flower buds. Instead, prune these right after blooming. Summer blooming shrubs that bloom on "new wood," or current year's growth, such as sweetshrub (*Calycanthus floridus*), beautyberry (*Callicarpa* spp.), and summersweet (*Clethra* spp.) are perfect candidates for winter pruning. Pay particular attention to hydrangeas because some species like panicle hydrangea (*Hydrangea paniculata*), smooth hydrangea (*Hydrangea arborescens*), and bracted hydrangea (*Hydrangea involucrata*) bloom on new wood, while bigleaf hydrangea (*Hydrangea macrophylla*), mountain hydrangea (*Hydrangea serrata*), and oakleaf hydrangea (*Hydrangea quercifolia*) bloom on old wood.

Make sure to always use clean, sharp tools. A dull blade will damage plant tissue by crushing it rather than cutting it. Cleaning your tools regularly, ideally between plants, reduces the threat of introducing disease. Using the appropriate type of tool is also essential for your safety and for the health of your plant. An arboriculture professor once taught me that if you have to use two hands to close your pruners on a branch, you need to step up to a saw. I find I can do most of my pruning at home with three tools — my Felcos No. 2 pruners, my Silky Pocketboy folding pocket saw, and my Silky Zubat 13” hand saw. I have had each of these professional-grade hand tools for about 15 years and keeping them sharp, clean, and oiled has them still performing like new.

Always keep safety in mind when pruning. Aim to do most, if not all, of your pruning with your feet on the ground. If you need to prune something above your head, try to use a pole saw rather than a ladder. Pay attention to your surroundings and keep the area under the plant you are pruning clear of tools, people, and pets.

Finally, embrace the joys of winter pruning. It gives us an opportunity for a breath of fresh air at a time of year when we often need it most!

Gardening Central Mass. is written by New England Botanic Garden at Tower Hill CEO Grace Elton and Director of Horticulture Mark Richardson. Located on 171 acres in Boylston. New England Botanic Garden creates experiences with plants that inspire people and improve the world. Learn more at www.nebg.org. The column is published on the third Sunday of the month.

