

# Pruning Ornamental Shrubs (and Grasses)

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Pruning, while one of the more common tasks in gardening, causes more confusion and stress for gardeners than most other common activities. Gardeners often don't know when or how to properly prune their shrubs. Some simply look over the fence at their neighbors' plants and assume that what they observe is the correct approach to pruning shrubs.

Pruning shrubs need not be a mysterious task. Asking a few simple questions can reduce the uncertainty of this task and yield better results.

One the first questions you need to ask is **WHY am I pruning?** Gardeners should have a legitimate reason behind their pruning actions. Pruning simply because your neighbors are pruning a similar shrub at a particular time of year does not mean you also have to prune.

Some valid reasons why pruning is justified include:

- 1) To remove dead or diseased wood
- 2) To eliminate structural problems such as crossing branches
- 3) To eliminate hazards such as branches blocking a sidewalk
- 4) To improve flowering
- 5) To reduce plant size
- 6) Aesthetics – shaping a shrub to fit a specific landscape style
- 7) Plant rejuvenation

If your reason for pruning is 1, 2 or possibly 3, the time to prune is **NOW**. These reasons for pruning

supersede any other reason (e.g., impact on flowering). The 'time to prune' for reasons 4 through 7 is more complicated and is influenced by the type of plant. This leads to the second major question a gardener needs to answer to help guide their pruning task: **WHEN does the plant flower?** In a majority of cases, shrubs are planted so their flowers can be enjoyed. Pruning can significantly impact flowering so we need to be aware of **WHEN** a shrub flowers.

**WHEN** a shrub flowers can be a big clue in helping decide when to prune. To do this, we will break flowering shrubs into two broad categories: 1) those that flower on 'old' wood and 2) those that flower on 'new' wood. Let's begin with the group of shrubs that flower on 'old' wood. With this group of flowering shrubs (Table 1), flower buds are formed in late summer/early fall of the previous year, and those flower buds are then carried through the winter. It is common sense for this group of flowering shrubs that we would recommend **pruning AFTER flowering** has been completed so the flowers can be enjoyed.

For the second group, those that flower on 'new' wood (flower buds are formed on current season's growth), **IF** we need to prune this group of flowering shrubs (Table 2), we can certainly prune early in the season **BEFORE flowering** and still have a great flower display in the current year. Often we perform this pruning procedure in late winter/early spring.

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**TABLE 1.** Ornamental shrubs/small flowering trees that flower on ‘old’ wood (i.e., flower buds are formed in late summer/early fall of the previous year, carried through the winter and then flower in spring).  
**Prune AFTER flowering** (IF pruning is necessary).

Scientific Name	Common Name
<i>Amelanchier</i> sp.	Serviceberry, Juneberry
<i>Camellia</i> sp.	Camellia
<i>Cercis</i> sp.	Redbud
<i>Chaenomeles</i> sp.	Floweringquince
<i>Chionanthus virginicus</i>	White Fringetree, Grancy Gray-beard
<i>Deutzia</i> sp.	Deutzia
<i>Forsythia</i> sp.	Forsythia
<i>Fothergilla</i> sp.	Fothergilla
<i>Gardenia</i> sp.	Gardenia
<i>Hydrangea macrophylla</i>	Bigleaf Hydrangea
<i>Hydrangea quercifolia</i>	Oakleaf Hydrangea
<i>Itea virginica</i>	Virginia Sweetspire
<i>Jasminum nudiflorum</i>	Winter Jasmine
<i>Kerria japonica</i>	Japanese Kerria
<i>Kolkwitzia amabilis</i>	Beautybush
<i>Lonicera fragrantissima</i>	Winter Honeysuckle
<i>Loropetalum chinense</i>	Chinese Fringe-flower
<i>Magnolia</i> sp.	Magnolia
<i>Malus</i> sp.	Crabapple
<i>Philadelphus</i> sp.	Mockorange
<i>Prunus</i> sp.	Plum, Cherry
<i>Pyracantha</i> sp.	Firethorn, Pyracantha
<i>Rhododendron</i> sp.	Azalea
<i>Spiraea cantoniensis</i> ‘Flore Pleno’	Double Reeves Spirea
<i>Spiraea prunifolia</i>	Bridalwreath Spirea
<i>Spiraea thunbergii</i>	Thunberg Spirea
<i>Spiraea</i> × <i>vanhouttei</i>	Vanhoutte Spirea
<i>Syringa</i> sp.	Lilac
<i>Viburnum</i> × <i>burkwoodii</i>	Burkwood Viburnum (also Koreanspice and Judd)
<i>Viburnum plicatum</i> var. <i>tomentosum</i>	Doublefile Viburnum
<i>Weigela florida</i>	Weigela

**TABLE 2.** Shrubs that flower on ‘new’ wood (i.e., flower buds are formed on current season’s growth).  
**Prune BEFORE flowering** (IF pruning is necessary).

Scientific Name	Common Name
<i>Abelia</i> × <i>grandiflora</i>	Glossy Abelia
<i>Buddleia</i> sp.	Butterflybush
<i>Callicarpa</i> sp.	Beautyberry
<i>Clethra alnifolia</i>	Summersweet Clethra
<i>Hibiscus syriacus</i>	Rose-of-Sharon
<i>Hydrangea arborescens</i>	Smooth Hydrangea
<i>Hydrangea paniculata</i>	Panicle Hydrangea
<i>Lagerstroemia</i> sp.	Crapemyrtle
<i>Rhus copallina</i>	Flameleaf Sumac
<i>Rosa</i> sp.	Roses
<i>Spiraea</i> × <i>bumalda</i>	Bumald Spirea
<i>Spiraea japonica</i>	Japanese Spirea
<i>Vitex agnus-castus</i>	Chasetree

The third and final critical question a gardener needs to answer is **HOW does the shrub grow?**

Look at the way branches are arranged near the soil line. Are there many branches/canes emerging from the ground at the base of the shrub (Figure 1), or does it grow more with one or a few main branches (Figure 2)?

If there are many branches emerging from the ground (Figure 1), it is likely a ‘suckering type’ shrub that rejuvenates itself readily from the ground (Table 3). Plants with a suckering-type growth habit respond well to **renewal pruning**. Renewal pruning involves removing entire branches or canes at or near ground level (Figure 3). A curved blade- or keyhole-type saw or lopper works very well when



**FIGURE 2.** Example of shrub growth habit with one or a few main branches. With this group of shrubs, growth depends less on suckers/rhizomes, and the shrubs lend themselves more to **selective thinning** (Table 4).



**FIGURE 1.** Example of a suckering-type growth habit on a shrub. Suckering shrubs respond well to **renewal pruning**.



**FIGURE 3.** Renewal pruning involves removing entire branches or canes at or near the ground level. A lopper works well when renewal pruning.

**TABLE 3.** Shrubs with a suckering-type growth habit; plant rejuvenates readily from the ground. Suckering shrubs respond well to **renewal pruning**.

Scientific Name	Common Name
<i>Chaenomeles</i> sp.	Floweringquince
<i>Cornus sericea</i>	Redtwig Dogwood
<i>Deutzia</i> sp.	Deutzia
<i>Forsythia</i> sp.	Forsythia
<i>Hydrangea macrophylla</i>	Bigleaf Hydrangea
<i>Hydrangea quercifolia</i>	Oakleaf Hydrangea
<i>Itea virginica</i>	Virginia Sweetspire
<i>Jasminum nudiflorum</i>	Winter Jasmine
<i>Kerria japonica</i>	Japanese Kerria
<i>Nandina domestica</i>	Heavenly Bamboo
<i>Philadelphus</i> sp.	Mockorange
<i>Potentilla</i> sp.	Potentilla
<i>Rhus</i> sp.	Sumac

**TABLE 4.** Shrubs grow with one or a few main trunks. With this group, growth depends less on suckers or rhizomes and the shrubs lend themselves to **selective thinning**.

Scientific Name	Common Name
<i>Amelanchier</i> sp.	Serviceberry, Juneberry
<i>Buddleia</i> sp.	Butterflybush
<i>Cornus alternifolia</i>	Pagoda Dogwood
<i>Cornus florida</i>	Eastern Flowering Dogwood
<i>Hamamelis</i> sp.	Witchhazel
<i>Hibiscus syriacus</i>	Rose-of-Sharon
<i>Magnolia</i> sp.	Magnolia
<i>Rhododendron</i> sp.	Azalea
<i>Viburnum</i> × <i>burkwoodii</i>	Burkwood Viburnum (also Koreanspice and Judd)
<i>Viburnum plicatum</i> var. <i>tomentosum</i>	Doublefile Viburnum



**FIGURE 4.** Before (left) and after (right) **renewal pruning**. Notice how the overall natural habit of the plant has been maintained.

renewal pruning. When renewal pruning is done correctly, the plant still maintains a natural plant habit (Figure 4).

Following renewal pruning, new shoots typically emerge from the cut stem surfaces or from underground roots/stems. For this reason, if your pruning cut is 6 to 10 inches above the ground surface, the new shoots will often emerge from those ‘stubs,’ leaving an unsightly pruning job (Figure 5). Another general



**FIGURE 5.** When renewal pruning, make your pruning cuts as close to the ground as possible to avoid ‘stubs.’

statement related to renewal pruning is do not remove more than one-third of the branches or canes at any one time, thus rejuvenating the plant slowly over time. There certainly are exceptions to this rule. Specific species (see Hedges, section B, page 7) or very vigorous/healthy plants can tolerate removing even more of the original plant without killing it.

If, on the other hand, you see primarily one or two major branches coming up from the ground (Figure 2, Table 4), the most appropriate pruning technique would be ‘selective thinning’/‘thinning cut’ or a ‘heading cut.’ Selective thinning involves the cutting back of a branch/twig to its point of origin; whereas, a heading cut reduces a young shoot back to a bud (Figure 6). When properly done, selective thinning can reduce the overall plant size while maintaining a natural plant habit. Selective thinning may also be used on suckering-type shrubs, but this method would be used higher in the canopy.

No matter what the pruning technique (renewal or selective thinning), the goal of a good pruning job should be to maintain the natural growth habit of the plant. While ‘shearing’ is a legitimate pruning technique, it is over utilized in most residential and commercial landscapes (Figure 7).



**FIGURE 6.** Selective thinning/thinning cut (left picture) involves cutting back of a branch/twig to its point of origin; heading cut (right picture) reduces a young shoot back to a bud.



**FIGURE 7.** Does every shrub in a landscape need to be sheared? Anyone can shear, but applying proper pruning techniques takes greater skill that yields a more natural outcome.

In summary, when considering when and how to prune your ornamental shrubs, you can ask yourself three simple questions:

- 1) **Do I need to prune?**
- 2) **When does this ornamental shrub flower?**
- 3) **How does this shrub grow?**

Taking the time to answer these three basic questions will make pruning a more enjoyable task and improve your results.

## Special Cases

### Crapemyrtles

Many other authors have coined the term ‘crape murder’ (Figure 8) for what is often seen on crape-myrtles in the South. ‘Crape murder’ involves the harsh, nonselective heading-back/topping of the large stems during the dormant season. This harsh process reduces the aesthetic value and results in a weaker branch structure. Gardeners can achieve size control using proper pruning techniques (selective thinning or renewal pruning) rather than topping and still maintain an aesthetically pleasing plant (especially in the long dormant season). One way to minimize the amount of pruning required to keep your crape-myrtle at the desired size for your landscape situation is to plant the appropriately sized cultivar initially. Today we are very fortunate to have crape-myrtles that range in size from 1 to 40 feet in height (<http://www.uaex.uada.edu/yard-garden/resource-library/crape-myrtle/>).



**FIGURE 8.** ‘Crape Murder’

## Ornamental Grasses

Remember that the growing point for grasses is near ground level, so the foliage can be cut back significantly without limiting future growth. Cutting back ornamental grasses is not required, but IF you are going to do it, wait until the ornamental value of the seedheads and foliage has deteriorated (late fall to early winter, depending on the grass) so you enjoy the important landscape value of this group of plants. For small to medium grasses (e.g., *Hakonechloa*, *Panicum*, *Pennisetum*, *Nasella*), use hedge shears to cut these grasses back to 3 to 6 inches, depending on

the overall size of the grass (Figure 9). Cutting back larger grasses (e.g., *Miscanthus*, *Calamagrostis*, *Cortaderia*) is a challenge since there is so much aboveground biomass. Handheld or gas- or electric-powered tools may be necessary to cut through the dense mat of grass stems. You may wish to try pruning small sections of the clump at a time or wrapping the entire clump with rope to keep the grass foliage from collapsing as you work. With these larger grasses, you may be lucky to cut the mound back to 12 inches.



**FIGURE 9.** For small to medium grasses (e.g., *Hakonechloa*, *Panicum*, *Pennisetum*, *Nasella*), use hedge shears to cut these grasses back to 3 to 6 inches, depending on the overall size of the grass.

## Junipers

Most junipers have a natural, irregular outline; therefore, shearing junipers destroys that desirable characteristic. Repeated shearing causes the needles to develop in a narrow band at the outer edge of the plant. A general rule of thumb for junipers, pines and *Cryptomeria* is to not prune back into the interior of the plant on older wood where there are *no needles*, as the plant is unlikely to recover and produce new

adventitious shoots and needles. These extreme types of thinning cuts will likely leave unsightly gaps in the plant. A simple way to prune most junipers is to grab a shoot (with a gloved hand) and follow that shoot to a branch point on the interior of plant (Figure 10). By following that simple rule, you can drastically reduce the size of the juniper, hide your pruning cuts and maintain a natural, irregular outline.



**FIGURE 10.** A simple way to prune most junipers is to grab (with a gloved hand) a shoot and follow that shoot to a branch point on the interior of plant. **Far right:** The alternative method of simply shearing the edge is faster in the short term but destroys the natural shape of the plant and leads to long-term problems of needles being bunched in a narrow band at the outer edge of the plant.

## Hedges

### A. Formal Hedges – Shape

When shearing plants to develop/maintain a formal shape, it is best to prune the top so it is narrower than the base (Figure 11).



**FIGURE 11.** Formal hedges. **Left:** Poorly shaped (wider at top than bottom). **Middle and Right:** Ideal shape (wider at base).

### B. Specific Species

There are many good choices for hedge or screen plants in Arkansas (<https://www.uaex.uada.edu/yard-garden/home-landscape/MP510%20hedge.pdf>). For some broadleaf evergreen species (e.g., Loropetalum, Burford Chinese holly, thorny Elaeagnus, Nellie R. Stevens holly, Japanese privet, southern waxmyrtle), you can be quite aggressive IF NECESSARY and cut the plants back severely to large, interior branches (Figure 12). While not guaranteed, the plant will recover well from such severe pruning in most cases with these species. THIS EXTREME TYPE OF PRUNING SHOULD BE USED AS A LAST RESORT AND NOT AS A ROUTINE PRACTICE.



**FIGURE 12.** **Left:** Thorny Elaeagnus hedge at least 10 feet tall. **Middle:** Cut back by two-thirds on March 1 using a chainsaw. **Right:** Same hedge three months later. THIS EXTREME TYPE OF PRUNING SHOULD BE USED AS A LAST RESORT AND NOT AS A ROUTINE PRACTICE.

## Pruning Equipment

Generally for shrub pruning, you need at least three tools – a by-pass hand pruner, a lopper and a nice pair of leather gloves (Figure 13). A curved blade/keyhole-type saw is also a useful pruning tool. Research has shown that there is no need to apply pruning paint/wound dressing to cut surfaces. Wound dressing does not reduce decay or speed wound closure.



**FIGURE 13.** Common tools for shrub pruning include a lopper, a by-pass hand pruner, a curved blade/keyhole-type saw and a nice pair of leather gloves.

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