

Pruning after a heavy snowstorm



Steve Renquist
Ask a Master Gardener

Question: The recent snowstorm that hit Douglas County did an enormous amount of damage to my landscape plants. I have lived in Douglas County for over 20 years and never had this much snow before. How should I prune my trees and shrubs to help them recover once the snow has melted?

Answer: With so many different forms of shrubs and types of trees this issue is a little complex. However, if you follow a few basic guidelines you can do much of the recovery pruning on your small trees and shrubs. You will probably want to let a tree care service help you with corrective shade tree pruning.

The first question you may ask yourself is: When should I prune these damaged plants? The answer is “as soon as weather permits.” It is getting pretty late in the dormant season and corrective pruning will often remove a lot of wood and buds. If you wait until spring or summer, your pruning will shock the plant more by removing new leaves. This timing is true for deciduous plants and for evergreen plants.

If you need to prune a wide variety of shrubs remember the natural form of most shrubs fall into one of three groups. The first group is mound forming. Examples would be spirea, holly, hebe, azalea, pieris and abelia. If these plants are flattened, they can be pruned back to a rounded form or even within 5 to 6 inches of the ground and still recover.

The second group is the cane producers. This group includes roses, forsythia, weigela, lilac, mock orange, barberry, nandina and hydrangea. Any shrub that wants to produce many upright canes would be in this group. If these plants are flattened, or if canes are broken, they also can be pruned back. Try not to make these plants into mounds. Leave as many canes as possible, but do not leave cracked or smashed canes connected to the plant. These plants will typically make new shoots that will arise from the base of the plant.

The third group is upright shrubs. These shrubs tend to get quite large and include rhododendron, viburnum and camellia families. This group of large shrubs most likely suffered the most damage from the heavy wet snow. When these plants are broken down low it is often necessary to prune for renovation by cutting 4 to 6 inches above the ground



PHOTOS COURTESY OF STEVE RENQUIST

The weight of the recent snow broke the top half of a pine tree out completely and caused a large willow tree to drop a significant number of limbs in Steve Renquist's yard.



The weight of a heavy snow can bend a young tree over. This tree will need to be straightened up with guide lines or a tall stake for a year to regain its upright form.

near the base of the upright trunks. This type of pruning can be successful but if the plant is old, it may not make new shoots from the remaining stubs.

When working with small shade or flowering trees that have been damaged by the weight of the snow, first remove any broken limbs. The type of cuts we recommend are made about half an inch away from where the limb attached to the trunk or larger branch. Do not make flush cuts that are smooth with the trunk. Flush

cuts tend to cause dieback into the trunk or main limb. Once broken limbs have been removed you can decide if you need to prune more to balance the top of the tree.

Pruning to balance the top growth will allow the tree to recover the natural form over time. If a branch made a large tear in the wood or bark when it fell, it may be necessary to remove more of the damaged limb. Trees that have been damaged back into the main trunk may require either radical pruning or removal since



A 60 foot tall maple tree in Steve Renquist's yard lost many 20 foot sections of upper limbs due to the weight of the snow from the recent storm.

that type of wound will always be an entry point for wood-rotting fungi. If the top of a tree was broken off you should evaluate whether the natural form will ever return. If the shape has been ruined you may want to remove the tree.

If you have evergreen conifers that were damaged and you need to prune back broken branches, remember that once you cut back into wood that has no needles, it will not generate any new shoots. Severely damaged branches should be removed all the way back to the

main limb or trunk of the tree. If a large tree seems to be intact but the tree is leaning, have an arborist or other trusted person help you make a decision about how safe the tree seems.

Steve Renquist is the Horticulture Extension Agent for OSU Extension Service of Douglas County. Do you have a gardening question? Email, call or visit the Douglas County Master Gardener Plant Clinic at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu, 541-672-4461 or 1134 SE