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A forsythia in bloom.

All about timing

Pruning shrubs and trees in fall versus late winter depends on species

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Question: I would like to know if there is a best time of year to prune deciduous shrubs and flowering trees to retain their bloom in spring and to keep them healthy. Is there a best time of year to prune evergreen trees and shrubs?

Answer: There is a best time of year for pruning with all shrubs and trees. Generally speaking, once a woody deciduous shrub or tree has lost its leaves in fall, using proper pruning techniques will not shock or weaken the plant. In our part of Oregon, we often experience our coldest weather in December or January. Waiting until the most severe cold of winter has passed is a good idea. Here are a few other things to think about before you go out and start whacking away, so read on.

The first thing to ask yourself is, why do I want to prune this plant? Is the plant damaged, is the plant getting too large where I planted it, do I want to renovate an old plant, or do I want to train the plant into an artistic form?

Most people prune for size control, but this is the worst reason you can have. If a plant is getting too large for the place you planted it, it should be moved. Plants should be chosen for each spot in your yard based on their eventual size. If you want to plant shrubs around your house that stay below your windows, ask your nursery for a selection of plants that stay shorter than 4 feet tall when mature. This is good for the plant and you, as it reduces your annual workload.

The next thing to think about is what type of pruning cuts to make on each of your shrubs and trees. If the shrub is a natural mounding form, you may not need to prune it at all. Mugo pine or azalea would be good examples of no-prune shrubs. Don't



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A plant in the wrong place.

shear mounding shrubs. Sheared shrubs get too dense. Just remove an occasional branch all the way at the ground level to open the plant slightly.

If a shrub is a tall cane producer like forsythia or climbing rose, just thin out canes if the plant is getting too dense by cutting a few near the ground. Annually remove about one third of the canes to keep the plants vigorous and healthy. Topping cane-producing plants just causes the plants to get too dense.

Upright shrubs like camellia and rhododendron should not be pruned except for thinning out some inside shoots if the plant seems to be getting too dense. These plants get large and will need a lot of room. Don't plant them next to your house under the eaves or you will have a major pruning

job every year. If you must prune camellia or rhododendron plants, do it after they bloom in spring to minimize flower removal.

Two other important things to ask about before pruning flowering trees or shrubs are, when do my trees and shrubs bloom? and do they bloom on the existing one-year wood or do they bloom on the new wood that grows in the coming summer? This is important to know so you don't cut off all the flower-bearing branches in winter when you prune. Crabapple is an example of a flowering tree that makes fruit buds on old wood. If you prune these trees aggressively in winter, you will dramatically reduce the bloom in spring. Wait until the tree is done flowering in spring before pruning.

The early yellow flowering forsythia is a shrub that blooms on 1-year-old canes or older. Wait until the plant blooms in late winter before pruning.

The butterfly bush and crape myrtle are woody plants that bloom on new growth in mid to late summer. These plants can be pruned aggressively in winter if desired and will bloom on new growth.

Conifers, no matter the size, never go into complete dormancy, but they do slow their growth dramatically at the end of summer into early fall in our dry Mediterranean climate. Therefore fall is the best time of year to prune conifers to minimize any negative effects. Try to minimize any radical pruning or shearing to evergreens, and never prune back branches into bare wood with no remaining needles. This type of pruning will kill limbs.

Do you have a gardening question? Please email, call, or visit the Douglas County Master Gardener Plant Clinic at douglasmg@oregonstate.edu, 541-672-4461, or 1134 S.E. Douglas Ave., Roseburg.