

What are the basic steps for pruning most plants?

“Prune to natural form so your work becomes invisible.”

1. BEFORE YOU PRUNE

1. Determine your pruning objective. Are you pruning for:

- plant health;
- aesthetics;
- to control size;
- fruit production & accessibility;
- shaping young plants for health & function;
- safety of people and structures?

2. Research your plant to determine the best time to prune (refer to *RHS Pruning Groups* - <https://www.rhs.org.uk/pruning/rhs-pruning-groups>).



Example of crossing and extremely “deranged” branches.

2. STEPS FOR PRUNING

1. Begin pruning by focusing on the 4 “Ds”

- **Dead/dying** - can be removed any time of year.
- **Diseased** - cut back at least 10 cm (4") into healthy wood if possible.
- **Damaged** - eliminate pathways for disease by removing broken branches and those with wounds.
- **Deranged** - branches growing in the wrong direction, out of proportion to the rest of plant or crossing and rubbing on other branches.

2. Open up the whole plant to light and air using mostly branch removal cuts*.

3. Prune for **shape** using mostly if not all branch removal and reduction cuts.

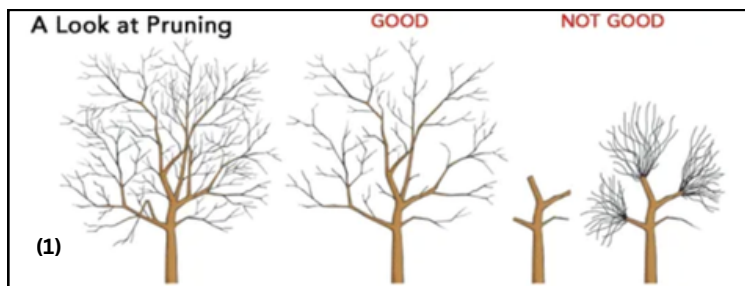
*See InfoSheet “What Are the Basic Pruning Cuts?”



Don't paint the wound, it just locks in moisture and pathogens which can lead to rot.

3. HOW MUCH TO REMOVE

- Most plants have a ‘pruning budget’ of no more than 15% of the plant in one growing season.
- Removing too much can result in an explosion of growth or death of the plant.

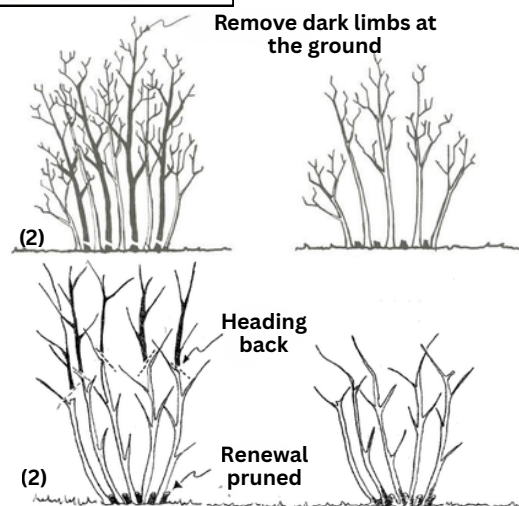


Dramatically different results from branch removal and reduction cuts vs. non-selective heading cuts!

4. MULTI-STEMMED SHRUBS & CANE GROWERS

Plants that send up new stems from the root ball under the ground every year, such as hydrangeas, lilac, hazel, blueberry, raspberry, forsythia, etc. Shearing will result in many small stems and tiny leaves just on the outside of the plant which changes its natural form and growth habit and is therefore not recommended. Instead...

- for established plants, remove the oldest 1-3 stems right to the ground every year. Stubs left behind will either die (unsightly and a path for disease) or sprout weak shoots (also unsightly).
- simplify remaining stems by tip pruning or heading back.
- head back the whole plant to rein it in if it gets too big and floppy.
- renovate an overgrown plant by removing 1/3 of stems 3 years in a row.
- renew by cutting entire plant to the ground.



Remove dark limbs at the ground

Heading back

Renewal pruned

RESOURCES

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1. Finch, C. (2014). *To prune or not to prune*. Garden Style, San Antonio. <https://www.gardenstylesanantonio.com/garden-articles/to-prune-or-not-to-prune/>
2. Wiederholt, K. (2024). *Pruning Shrubs for Fruit and Beauty*. NDSU Carrington Research Extension Center. <https://www.ag.ndsu.edu/carringtonrec/archive/documents/northernhardyfruitevaluationprojectrd/docsnoyear/pruning-shrubs-for-fruit-and-beauty>
3. Turnbull, C. (2012). *Cass Turnbull's Guide to Pruning (3rd ed.)*. Seattle, WA: Sasquatch Books.
4. Gurrad, D. (2023). *Introduction to Pruning*. Vancouver Island Regional Library (VIRL) Virtual Garden Series.

Physocarpus obtusifolia 'Coppertina'

Ninebark



Winter after leaf drop



After thinning out excess branches and heading back remaining ones in early March



Regrowth by the following September