

# HOW TO SUCCESSFULLY PRUNE ANY SHRUB

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## I. Basic rules for pruning woody ornamental plants

A. **Apical dominance:** terminal (apical) bud inhibits growth of lateral (axillary) and adventitious buds on the stem below

### B. Types of pruning cuts

1. **Heading:**
  - localized response (promotes branching at cut), 'hydra' effect
  - if cut in dormancy, stiffens the cut limb
  - selective heading cut: cut to a node
  - non-selective heading cut: topping, shearing or pinching hedges/ topiary
  - make cuts in interior of shrubs to decrease visibility of cuts
  - cut stems in shrubs at different heights to encourage a more natural shape of regrowth
2. **Reduction:** - cut branch back to lateral stem at least 50% the size of branch being cut
3. **Removal:** - spreads new growth evenly throughout entire plant
  - directs growth, promotes light penetration and air circulation, natural look
  - cut to point of branch origin, just outside of branch collar

### C. Proper method of cutting

1. Identify branch collar and branch bark ridge (some shrubs show these)
2. 3-step cut on large, heavy branches on larger shrubs
3. **CODIT** (Compartmentalization Of Decay In Trees): ability of trees to chemically seal off decay spread (present in some shrubs)

## II. Timing of pruning ornamental shrubs

### A. Timing basics for shrub pruning

1. Lightly prune anytime; remove dead, damaged, diseased and deranged growth as needed
2. Non-flowering evergreen broadleaves and conifers: prune lightly at any time
3. At planting: only prune dead, damaged, diseased and deranged growth; wait at least one year (or more) for plant establishment before doing heavy pruning
4. Established flowering shrubs: generally, can thin at any time and not affect flowering
  - **EARLY SPRING bloomers:** bloom on last year's wood, so prune (heading cuts) following bloom but before flower buds set on new growth for the next blooming season (examples: azaleas, forsythia, quince)
  - **LATE SPRING/ EARLY SUMMER bloomers:** bloom on current season's wood, so prune (heading cuts) in late dormancy or just prior to first flush of new growth (examples: abelia, hydrangea, roses)
5. If you don't know the bloom time, prune conservatively; do mostly thinning cuts

### B. Seasonal pruning pros and cons

1. **WINTER** (November-February)
  - plants are dormant, easy to see shrub framework
  - less pest and disease problems associated with pruning wounds
  - best time to do rejuvenation or renovation
2. **SPRING** (March-May)
  - **NOT** a good time to do heavy pruning, (plants are beginning growth), **except:**
    - roses, hydrangeas, dwarf pines (candle-prune)
    - evergreen broadleaf renovation, hedge shearing

3. **SUMMER** (**early**= June to mid – July; **late**= mid – July to mid – August)
  - thin out regrowth from previous heading cuts; remove dead, damaged, diseased and deranged growth; remove suckering growth in late summer
  - prune shrubs prone to suckering and or winter bleeding (examples: viburnums, magnolias, witch hazels, willows)
  - prune shrubs prone to fungal and bacterial diseases (examples: lilacs, maples)
  - final pruning of broadleaf hedges
4. **FALL** (September- early November)
  - do very little, if any, pruning; may stimulate new growth susceptible to early frost and cold temperatures

### III. Shrub Types

- A. **Cane growers** (examples: bamboo, flowering quince, forsythia, hydrangea, mock orange, nandina (heavenly bamboo), Oregon grape, red-twig/ yellow-twig dogwood, roses, weigela)
  1. plants renew growth by sending up canes; may be clumping or running; very tough; take hard pruning (can remove up to 1/3 of live branches and foliage per year)
  2. pruning basics
    - deadwood
    - remove 1/8 to 1/3 of oldest and weakest canes to the base yearly
    - remove the worst crossing canes to the base, encourage upright growth
  3. renovation
    - coppice or cut to ground in dormancy (radical renovation)
    - remove 1/3 to 1/5 of the canes over 3-5 years (conservative)
  
- B. **Mounds or forms** (examples: abelia, barberry, box/ privet honeysuckle, boxwood, choisya, escallonia, evergreen viburnums, Japanese holly, potentilla, rockrose, spiraea)
  1. grow in a mounding shape or defined form; need less aggressive pruning (can remove up to 1/3 of live branches and foliage per year)
  2. pruning basics
    - deadwood
    - do mostly thinning cuts spaced out evenly throughout the plant
    - following bloom, reach in and thin out or reduce unruly and too tall branches
  3. renovation
    - thin out some entire branches to the base of the plant to reduce crowding and open up the plant
  
- C. **Tree-likes** (examples: camellia, deciduous viburnums, enkianthus, huckleberry, manzanita, pieris, rhododendron, strawberry tree, witch hazel)
  1. plant form resembles a tree's branching habit; needs the least pruning; thin to enhance natural form (no more than 10-15% live branches and foliage per year)
  2. pruning basics
    - deadwood
    - thin out watersprouts, suckers, crossing, wrong way branches
    - thin out hanging or drooping branches on ground
  3. renovation
    - thin out entire branches to reduce crowding, or arborize

**WANDER, PONDER, THEN PRUNE**