

Pruning for Fruit and Flowers

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Introduction

When a gardener can't wait to get started in the spring garden, a task commonly undertaken is pruning. Most trees and shrubs benefit from annual pruning because pruning has a major influence on a shrub's flowering habit, shape, size, and pest problems. A regular pruning schedule protects plants, people, and property from injury, pests and damage. It's an important part of a long-term maintenance strategy.

Plant Health. Pruning removes dead and dying branches and stubs, allowing room for new growth and protecting property and passersby from damage. It also deters pest and animal infestation and promotes the plant's natural shape and healthy growth.

Maintenance. Pruning trees and shrubs encourages healthy fruit and flower production. Regular trimming develops hedge aesthetics and keeps evergreens proportioned and dense. Such maintenance supports a property's planned layout and appearance by controlling plant size and shape.

Protection. Regular pruning reduces the risk of storm damage to structures from broken branches and protects people from falling branches over walkways, driveways, and children's play areas. This practice also helps control pests and vermin by reducing their habitat options.

Pruning for Flowering

Perhaps the most confusing group of plants, when it comes to pruning, is flowering trees and shrubs. Pruning has a major influence on a plant's flowering. Over time, an un-pruned flowering plant may become woody, with little new growth to support flower bud development,

thus reducing flowering. However, indiscriminate pruning or pruning at the wrong time also may reduce a plant's flowering.

There is a lot of confusion and many questions about when plants should be pruned. The best answer is that different plants have different requirements. But, a general rule of thumb is that summer and fall flowering trees and shrubs are pruned in the dormant season (late winter / early spring) and spring flowering trees and shrubs are best pruned soon after their flowers fade.

Spring Flowering Trees and Shrubs. Spring-flowering shrubs typically bloom on one-year-old wood (twigs that grew new the previous summer). Flower buds develop in midsummer through fall for the following spring. Pruning in the fall and winter removes flowering wood with buds. Pruning in the early spring (before flowering) also would mean losing some blossoms.

Azaleas (*Rhododendron* spp.) are an excellent example of a flowering shrub that sets its flowers during the summer and flowers in the early spring. After flowering, the plant will put out a lot of new vegetative growth. By mid-summer, changes will have begun to occur in the plant buds. Vegetative buds which formerly produced leaves, will have changed to reproductive buds capable of forming flowers. Pruning after mid-summer will remove the flower buds destined to open in spring of the following year.

To maximize the next season's flowers on azaleas and other spring flowering plants, pruning ideally should be done right after the flowering period has ended. Pruning actually may be continued up to about mid-summer, but

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if it occurs any later, the plant's flowering potential will be reduced.

However, spring flowering shrubs can be rejuvenated or thinned after mid-summer or in early spring before flowering or growth starts. In this case flowers are sacrificed for growth management. If flowering shrubs are pruned for rejuvenation, the best time to prune is late winter or early spring. Pruning flowering shrubs at this time will reduce or eliminate blossoming in spring of that year, but the trade-off is in gaining healthier, more vigorous flowering shrubs in the long run.

Hydrangeas (*Hydrangea* spp.) also are an excellent example of a flowering shrub that sets its flowers during the summer. Hydrangea stems bloom only once. This year's flowers were formed during summer on last year's growth. Next year's flowers will develop on this year's growth. Pruning back all of the growth on a hydrangea will result in no flowers the next year. Only those branches which have previously bloomed should be removed. A properly pruned hydrangea leaves one-year old wood which will produce the new flowers.

On spring flowering shrubs which tend to set seed or fruit, roses for example, it is a good idea to 'deadhead' spent blossoms (remove flowers after they fade). While time-consuming, deadheading conserves the plant's energy, which would otherwise be spent on fruit and seed development.

Summer Flowering Trees and Shrubs. Summer-flowering shrubs bloom on new wood that grew earlier in the growing season. Pruning in the fall and winter does *not* remove flowering wood with buds. Pruning also may be done in the early spring and does not result in loss of blossoms.

Hibiscus (*Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*), Crape Myrtle (*Lagerstroemia indica*), Roses (*Rosa* sp.) and Buddleia

(*Buddleia davidii*) are examples of flowering plants that produces flowers on the current season's growth.

Summer-flowering plants also are pruned by thinning or for rejuvenation in the early spring before growth starts. Removing older canes of flowering shrubs allows better sunlight penetration into the shrub. This results in better flowering throughout the shrub, instead of flowers just at the top where sunlight is sufficient.

Pruning for Fruiting

Pruning for fruit is similar to pruning for flowering. Most plants which we grow for their fruit fall into the category of spring flowering plants. That means that the flowers which develop into fruit were formed the previous summer or winter.

Most fruiting plants are pruned in early spring (February to March in North Florida), and there is the potential for removal of some fruit. However, most fruiting plants produce many more flowers than are needed to produce the number of fruit that it can reasonably bear.

Most fruit trees are pruned to encourage new growth. This also helps to keep plants short and stocky. Strong branches allow the tree to bear a fruit load without breaking. Most small fruit plants, such as grapes and blueberries which produce fruit on new growth should be pruned annually.

Additional Tips

Remove suckers, water sprouts and most competing branches growing straight up through the tree - - they won't produce fruit and use a lot of the tree's resources. Make cuts so that the plants growth is directed outward. Reduce the number of fruit on a branch to increase fruit size.

Beyond these little tips, each tree or shrub has its unique pruning needs. Understanding what each species needs is the key to successful pruning and fruit production.