



Colorado MASTER GARDENER

Pruning Flowering Shrubs

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Why Prune?

Pruning has a major influence on a shrub's flowering habit, size, shape, and pest problems.

Prune to Encourage Flowering

Pruning has a major influence on shrub flowering. Over time, an unpruned flowering shrub becomes woody with little new growth, which supports flower bud development.

Spring-flowering shrubs bloom on one-year-old wood (twigs that grew new the previous summer). Buds develop mid-summer through fall for the following spring. Pruning in the fall to spring removes flowering wood with buds. However, the old adage "head back spring flowering shrubs after blooming" may lead to an incorrect understanding of proper pruning techniques. Spring-flowering shrubs should be thinned or renewed (see Figure 1.) in early spring before flowering or growth starts.

On spring-flowering shrubs it is recommended to *deadhead* spent blooms (remove flowers after they fade). While time-consuming, it conserves

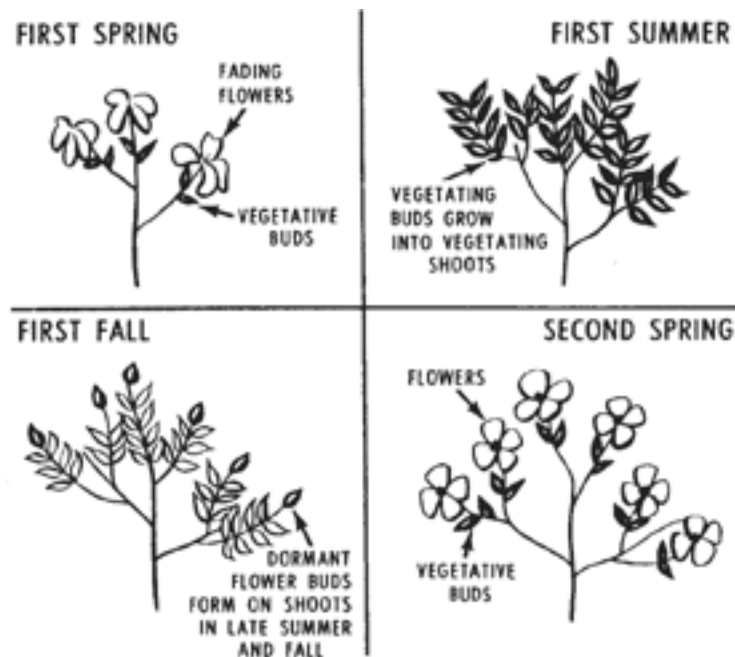


Figure 1. Spring-flowering shrubs bloom from buds that developed on new wood the previous summer.



Putting Knowledge to Work

the plant's energy, which would otherwise be spent on seedpod and seed development. On many shrubs, the spent flowers and seedpods are not attractive.

Summer-flowering shrubs bloom on new wood that grew earlier this growing season. Summer-flowering shrubs are also pruned by thinning or renewal in the early spring before growth starts.

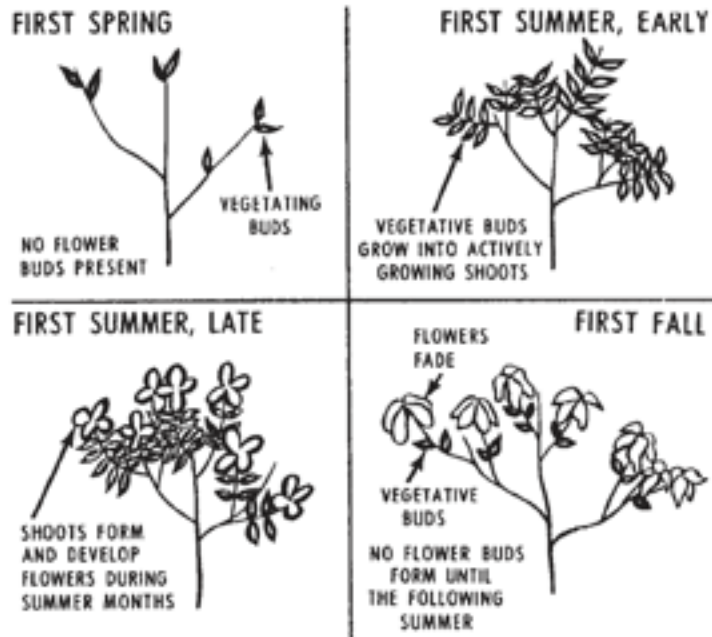


Figure 2. Summer-flowering shrubs blossom from buds that developed on new wood that grew earlier this growing season.

On shrubs noted for their bark color (like Red-Twig Dogwood), the new growth has more brilliant color. Routine pruning encourages new shoots, which have the desired red color.

Removing older canes of flowering shrubs such as lilac also allow 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.

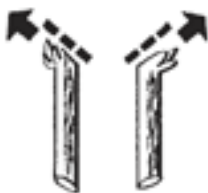


Figure 3. Shape can be managed to some extent by pruning to buds and branches growing in the desired direction of growth.

Prune to Direct Shape

Shaping is another reason for pruning shrubs. Shape can be managed to some degree by pruning to side buds or branches growing in the desired direction. While pruning has some control over size, it is not an effective method to keep a large shrub in a small space. Where shrubs have overgrown their space, consider replacing the plants with smaller cultivars or other species.

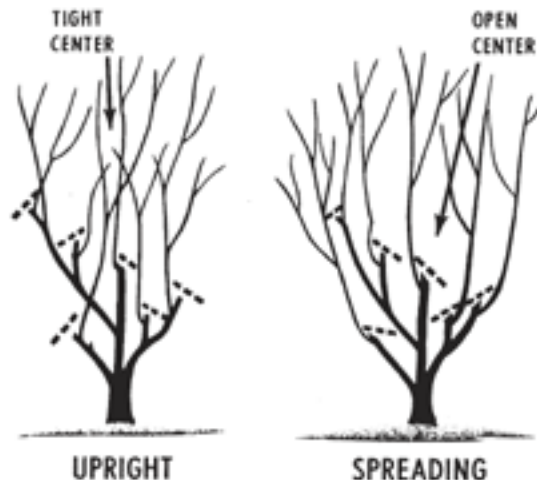


Figure 4. Pruning to inward growing buds or branches results in narrower shrubs. Pruning to outward-growing buds or branches results in wider shrubs.

Prune to Manage Pests

Pruning is a management technique for some insect or disease problems. For example, removing the older wood in lilac reduces the incidence of oystershell scale and borers. Thinning a shrub to increase air circulation reduces the incidence of powdery mildew and leaf spot diseases.

Pruning Methods for Flowering Shrubs

The primary objective in pruning flowering shrubs is to encourage new (flowering) growth from the base. This is best accomplished by renewal pruning or annual thinning. Shearing is another popular pruning method, but does not promote flowerings. On some sites, shrubs are routinely replaced when they become overgrown rather than deal with pruning.

Shear to Shape

Shearing shrubs to a round ball or other desired shape is a common pruning technique because it is quick and easy. However, sheared shrubs lose their natural shape and the rounded balls may detract from a more natural informal landscape design. Shaping spring flowering shrubs after mid-summer removes the new wood with next year's blossoms.

Frequent shearing does not encourage new growth from the base, which is needed to promote flowering.

With frequent shearing, the plant becomes bushier on the exterior. The thick outer foliage may shade out the interior and lower foliage and the plant becomes a thin shell of foliage and flowers with a woody interior and base. The thin shell of foliage is prone to browning and burning from winds and cold weather. Over time, shrubs become woody with lots of dead branches and few flowers. When shrubs become overly woody from routine shearing, replacement is the best option to refresh the landscape design.

Cutting back and shaping an overgrown shrub will not restore its natural informal form. It will simply look like an overgrown shrub that has been pruned.

Figure 5. Flowering shrubs pruned by topping or shearing become woody at the base.

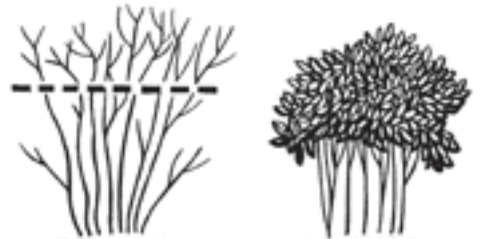


Figure 6. In pruning shrubs, try to maintain the natural shape of the plant. A common mistake is to shape shrubs with a wide top and narrow base. Lack of sunlight shades out lower interior growth resulting in a woody base.

Thinning

One method to encourage shrub flowering is with annual thinning. The objective is to remove one-third of the older wood to the ground each year, which in turn stimulates new (flowering) growth from the base of the shrub. This is done in the spring before growth starts. When done correctly, this method becomes rather time consuming and is difficult to nearly impossible to do on multi-stem, twiggy-type shrubs.

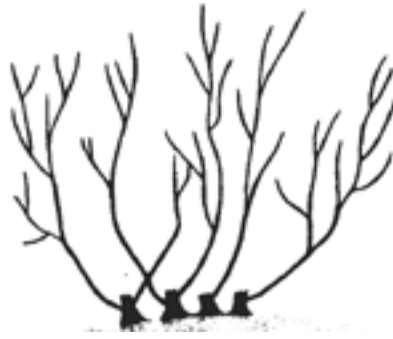


Figure 7. Annual thinning removes one-third of the oldest wood to the base each spring. This encourages new growth from the base, keeping the shrub youthful looking.

Rejuvenation Pruning

Many shrubs can be easily renewed with rejuvenation pruning. The shrub is cut entirely to the ground in the early spring before growth starts. The shrub simply regrows from roots, giving a compact youthful plant with maximum bloom. This is the method preferred for most flowering shrubs, being quick and easy with great results.

Rejuvenation is typically done every three to five years, basically when the shrub begins to look gangly and woody. It works superbly well on multi-stem twiggy-type shrubs such as Hydrangeas, Spiraea, Caryopteris (Bluebeard), Potentilla, Red-twig Dogwood, and Sumac. (Note: Caryopteris flowers best if renewed each spring.)

Limitations:

- Spring flowering shrubs will not bloom the year of renewal.
- A rock and landscape fabric mulch around the base of flowering shrubs may interfere with the new growth originating from the base. This can seriously impact the success of renewal pruning.
- Extremely overgrown shrubs with a large woody base may not respond well to renewal pruning.
- Plants with a lot of dead branches will not respond well to renewal pruning. As a rule of thumb, if more than one-fourth of the branches are woody, without healthy foliage, the shrub will probably not respond.
- Some shrubs have only a single main trunk or a few primary trunks, and are really small trees. This includes several of the Viburnum and Euonymus species, and shrubby forms of Rhamnus (buckthorn). Don't cut these shrubs to the ground. Prune by thinning branches back to a side branch.
- Lilac cultivars budded onto common lilac root stocks should not be cut to the ground. Regrowth will be common lilac rather than the selected cultivar.

Replacement

In many commercial sites, labor issues prohibit routine pruning. When shrubs become overgrown they are simply replaced as a low maintenance alternative.

Additional Information

Fact Sheets on Pruning

- 7.820, *Tree Growth and Decay*
- 7.821, *Pruning Cuts*
- 7.822, *Structural Training: Trees with a Central Leader*
- 7.823, *Structural Training: Trees with Multiple Scaffold Branches*
- 7.824, *Structural Training of Trees – Pruning Flow Chart*
- 7.825, *Pruning Mature Shade Trees*
- 7.826, *Pruning Flowering Shrubs*
- 7.827, *Pruning Evergreens*

Books

Edward F Gilman. *An Illustrated Guide to Pruning*, Second Edition. Delmar. 2002

Web

<http://hort.ifas.ufl.edu/woody/pruning/>

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