



PRUNING

by Laurel Rady

UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County

Few tasks are more intimidating to gardeners than pruning -- and since damaged plants and stunted growth can result from a bad pruning job, it's no wonder. But done correctly, at the right time, pruning is one of the best things you can do for your plants and all you need is some basic knowledge, the right tools, and a little practice. Good pruning controls a plant's shape and encourages its development; removes dead, damaged, and diseased material; can slow or enhance growth; can rejuvenate an older plant; can stimulate flowers and foliage; and keeps plants healthy.

Few tools are needed for normal garden pruning. Buy the best tools you can afford -- they will cut better, stay sharper, and last longer. Tools with carbon steel blades stay sharp longer than less expensive blades; and a sharp pruner is easier to cut with, makes a cleaner cut, and exerts less stress on your hand. Keep your tools clean, as a single cut on a diseased branch can spread that disease throughout your entire garden. To avoid that spread, you should wipe your tool blades with diluted bleach before using that tool on another plant. Before putting your tools away, wipe the blades with rubbing alcohol and allow them to thoroughly dry.

There are two types of pruning cuts, and plants respond differently to each. Thinning cuts open a plant up, reduce growth, and allow additional light to penetrate, while maintaining the plant's natural shape. Heading cuts encourage dense interior growth, and can radically change a plant's shape. The kind of cuts you make should depend on your desired result.

9/16/2020

Most trees need little to no pruning for several years, and naturally develop well-spaced branches and a main structure -- especially if they are right for your climate zone and planted in the correct spot. However, mature trees need to be pruned to promote their health, appearance, size, flowers, foliage, and fruit. To promote rapid growth, prune deciduous trees during their dormant period (this may differ, depending on the variety of the plant). To retard growth, prune when the plant's growing season is nearly over. Never prune the central trunk or shear off the top of a mature tree as this destroys the tree's natural form and forces the growth of many weak, upright shoots.

Generally, spring-flowering plants should be pruned as soon as their flowers fade. Next year's flower buds form as soon as the current flowers finish blooming -- so the longer you wait to prune, the more of next spring's buds you will cut off. However, plants that flower in summer and fall should not be pruned until winter, because their flower buds don't form until the following spring, when new growth begins.

Before pruning, assess the situation and what needs to be done. Select the right month and time of day for pruning, then formulate a plan and set a manageable goal. Assemble the correct tools for the job. Be aware of possible safety issues. If possible, work with another person. Wearing protective clothing year-round is a good idea, as well as not lifting or carrying more than you should. Stop work and rest when you need to. Always have water available and keep your phone nearby.

Each plant we add to our garden is an investment, and it will require specific conditions and care. Like any investment, understanding how to take care of your plants will maximize your success. With practice and a little research, you can master pruning. Get to know your plants and find out what pruning method (if any) is best for them. Understand how a plant's shape and growing habits influence when and how it should be pruned. A bit of homework will produce great results.

Master Gardeners continue to offer gardening classes on-line. A five-part online class series, Gardening in a Changing Climate, will be held on Wednesdays from 3:00 to 4:30 PM beginning September 9 (you are welcome to join us midway through the series). Please go to http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/Public_Education_Classes/?calendar=yes&g=56698 for registration instructions and to see all upcoming online classes.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic Master Gardener events will for the foreseeable future be limited. Please see our calendar of events for learning opportunities. We realize our public classes are valued by County residents and we especially appreciate your continued support and understanding during this public health challenge.

The Sherwood Demonstration Garden, located at 6699 Campus Drive in Placerville, is open to the public, from 9 AM to noon on Fridays and Saturdays. State and county public health guidelines require us to limit visitors to ten at a time (including our docents) and ask that they practice social distancing and wear face coverings. Restrooms will not be open. Check http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu/Demonstration_Garden for more information.

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Have a gardening question? Master Gardeners are working hard remotely and can still answer your questions. Leave a message on our office telephone: 530-621-5512, or use the “Ask a Master Gardener” option on our website: mgeldorado.ucanr.edu. We’ll get back to you! Master Gardeners are also on Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest.

Stay safe and follow recommended health and sanitation practices in the coming weeks.

For more information on the UCCE Master Gardeners of El Dorado County, see our website at <http://mgeldorado.ucanr.edu>. To sign up for notices and newsletters, see <http://ucanr.edu/mastergardener> e-news.