

Needham's Nursery

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PRUNING YOUR PLANTS

Have you walked out the door lately only to notice that your shrubs have grown beyond your expectations? Before simply chopping away on them, take a moment to stop and look at the entire plant and never cut off a branch without a good reason to do so. There are several good reasons to prune a plant, such as removing dead, diseased, insect infested and broken branches or to achieve a desired size or shape. Removal of damaged branches will keep the plant healthy by eliminating any part that might slow the growth of the entire plant. Pruning to change the size or proportion of a plant when it has overgrown an area can lead to a healthier garden. Other times you may prune so a plant retains a desired shape such as a hedge row or a topiary plant. Certain rules apply as to when to prune back a shrub. If it is a flowering shrub, it is best to wait until after it has finished blooming for the year. For example, azaleas and other spring blooming plants flower on the last year's growth. Pruning these plants back after blooming will allow the plant to use the remainder of the year growing and setting new buds for the following years blooms. Summer blooming plants such as crepe myrtles are pruned in the fall after the blooms are spent or in the early spring when the first signs of new growth are apparent. Most other evergreens are best pruned first in early spring to shape and then again in the early summer time. This allows for the new growth from the spring to mature, and also gives the plant enough time to set fresh new growth before winter sets in. You should never trim your evergreens in the heat of the summer, because then the time is limited for the fresh new growth to mature before cold weather arrives. Most deciduous trees should only be trimmed after they have dropped their leaves in the late fall to early winter months. An exception to winter pruning on trees involves birch and maple trees. These types of trees should only be pruned in late fall.

There are several different methods of pruning that can be used to gain the desired effect you are seeking. One such method is known as Thinning. Thinning involves removing certain branches from a plant to open it up. This will allow you to keep the natural shape of the plant, and also accommodate for more sunlight to reach the inner portion of the plant. More light will allow more new growth to develop on the inside of the plant. Many fruit bearing plants need to be thinned out to induce a larger yield of flowers and fruit. The most commonly used pruning style is known as Heading Back, and involves the use of a hedge trimmer. Heading Back involves removing the tips of the plant to create very formal squared hedges or rounded shrubs. Because a severe winter can have damaging effects on some plants in your landscape, Renewal Pruning can be necessary. This type of pruning involves removing cold damaged branches by cutting them at the ground level, this allows the plant to produce new growth and more flowers.

Using the proper tools for the type of pruning job you are doing is vital to the success of your pruning. There are four basic tools you should have for pruning: hand shears, hedge clippers, loppers, and pruning saws. Hand shears should be used to make the smallest possible cuts on the thinnest branches. When using hand shears to make a specific cut, you should first locate the nearest active bud on the limb. Then, make a 45° cut just above the bud. This angled cut will allow water to run off the cut and aid in the speed of the healing process. This cut can also allow you to control the direction of growth on the plant you are trimming to some degree. Hedge clippers can be used to easily groom a plant into

formal shapes such as boxes and spheres. Loppers are best used for cutting hard areas where old branches that need removal are up to 1 inch in diameter. Finally, pruning saws are best used for limbs over 1 inch in diameter. When using a pruning saw, always cut upwards from the bottom of the limb first, then cut down from the top of the branch. If you were to cut from top to bottom, the weight of the limb will pull itself down causing the bark to be stripped from the underside of the branch. This kind of injury can leave the plant vulnerable to damage and disease. Remember to always keep the tools as clean as possible between pruning sessions. This can be easily accomplished by simply wiping your tools cutting surfaces with rubbing alcohol. This will prevent disease from unintentionally spreading throughout your landscape, and also keep your tools clean and in good working order.