

How to Prune Spring-Blooming Shrubs

It can be more than disappointing when flowering shrubs don't bloom as we expect them to. In many cases, well intentioned pruning gone awry may be the culprit.

Pruning too severely, pruning at the wrong time of year or not pruning enough can all lead to poor bloom performance. A perfect technique for one species may spell dire consequences for another. Remembering which shrubs bloom on this year's or last year's growth and the best times to prune can be confusing.

I have found that selective pruning in moderation consistently offers the most reliable results for most species. Modest pruning means removing no more than about one-quarter to one-third of live wood.

Heading or tip pruning all the stems is often suggested as a way to increase flower density. The downsides of this approach (and with shearing) include the risk of pruning off flowering shoots if the timing is off, overcrowded growth, loss of natural structure and aesthetics, and greater pruning demands.

Hard pruning and/or high fertilization rates promote highly vigorous shoots that produce lots of foliage at the expense of flowers (with some exceptions). Shrubs in poor vigor or in too much shade often won't manage to produce many flower buds either.

When to prune most spring blooming shrubs.

- Pruning during or right after blooms fade is a reasonable time for most species.
- Pruning late in the dormant season/early spring before new growth begins promotes vigorous growth.
- Pruning in summer suppresses new shoot growth; light pruning of errant branches is fine. Never do hard pruning in summer and don't prune drought stressed plants.

Learn how to recognize flower buds (they are often fatter or differently colored).

Most spring blooming shrubs should not need pruning every year just to promote bloom. Dwarf varieties with compact form rarely need to be pruned at all.

Do you need to dead head?

With the exception of repeat-blooming roses, removing the spent blooms from flowering shrubs is mostly a matter of aesthetic preference.

Shear winter and spring blooming heath as soon as blooms fade to maintain vigor and bloom.

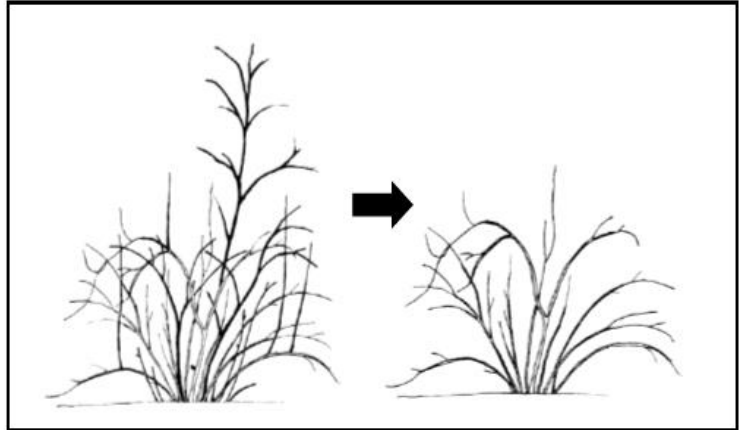
Winter heath (*Erica* species) are the exception to the guidelines listed above - these should be pruned every year or two to maintain bloom and shearing is a good method for this plant. Just as blooms begin to fade, shear to remove about 1/3 of the depth of green shoots. This will help keep the center of the plant from browning out over time. Next year's flower buds will form on new growth over summer.

Multi-stemmed shrubs.

These all produce new renewal stems from the roots. A simple approach to maintaining plant health and size is to remove up to a third of the oldest, unproductive, or overcrowded stems every couple years. Place cuts as close to soil level as possible, or at a point of attachment on a larger lateral branch. Then keep the remaining set of younger branches intact with little to no pruning. That way, you'll avoid the risk of losing flower buds and also preserve the natural habit of the plant.

This style of modest selective pruning can be done during the late dormant season before new growth begins, at or right after bloom period, or even in summer to remove just a very few branches.

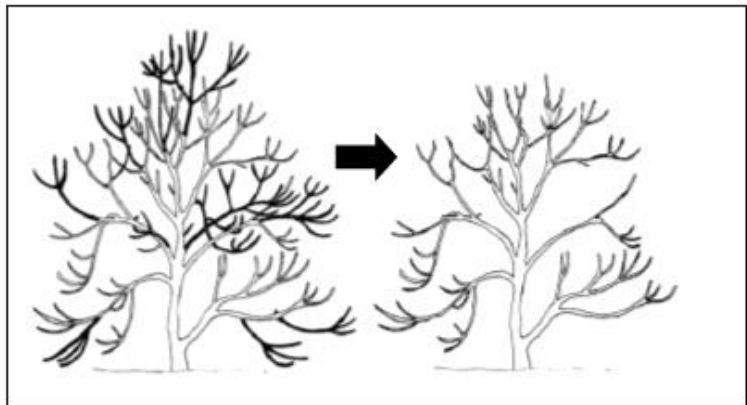
Examples: Deciduous azaleas and rhododendrons, forsythia, bridal wreath spirea, chokeberry (*Aronia*), flowering quince, winter hazel (*Corylopsis*) and some deciduous viburnum.



Mounded and tree-like shrubs.

These types of shrubs don't require annual pruning. Many can be trained nicely as a small tree. For optimal bloom performance, keep the hedge shears away from this group and also avoid tip pruning. Instead, do some periodic light thinning to maintain vigor and allow a little light to reach interior branches. Place pruning cuts at the point of attachment, and don't leave stubs.

Examples: camellia, witch hazel, evergreen California lilac (*Ceanothus*), *Osmanthus*, Japanese andromeda (*Pieris*), Mexican orange (*Choisia ternata*), some *Daphne*, evergreen azaleas and rhododendrons, and some evergreen viburnum.



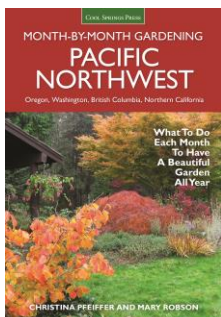
Either multi-stem or tree-like.

Flowering currant (*Ribes sanguineum*), shrub lilacs (*Syringa*).

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Pacific Northwest Month-by-Month Gardening by Christina Pfeiffer with Mary Robson. Cool Springs Press