

How to prune...so you don't have to prune so often

Avoid heading and tipping cuts.

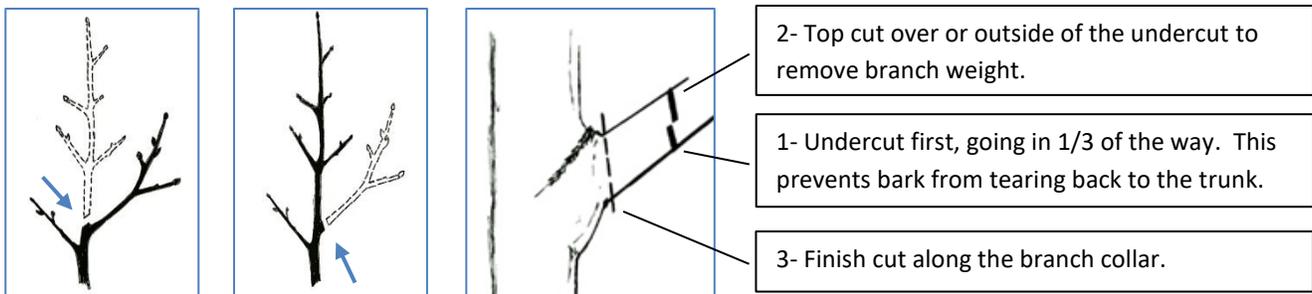
Shearing or lopping off branches usually results in lots of new growth near all those cut ends, leading to dense growth of long shoots --- and more pruning work.

Use selective pruning with cuts placed at natural point of branch attachment.

These cuts will preserve the natural form of the plant while reducing size and result in a more modest growth response. This allows for longer periods before pruning is needed again.

Reduction cuts are placed at a strong lateral branch that will become the new leader and is at least 1/3 the diameter of the removed stem (sometimes called selective heading).

Branch removal cuts are placed at the point of branch attachment to a larger stem or main trunk (also known as a thinning cut). On trees and larger shrubs, this cut is made at the branch collar with a slight angle that keeps the collar intact.



Reduction cut. Branch removal cut. 3-part branch collar cut.

Focus on the "4-Ds".

Start by removing those branches that are Dead, Damaged, or Diseased. Sometimes that's all that needed. The 4th D is for Dysfunctional branches, such as wayward growth, severely crossing branches, old branch stubs, branches overhanging walkways or co-dominant leaders in young trees.

Prune in moderation.

It's better to prune a little bit at a time more often than to remove a lot of growth at once. Rule of thumb - don't remove more than 1/4 of the live branches at a time. This way, the growth response will be more moderate and less erratic.

Keep interior branches on trees.

Thinning out too many interior branches often results in lots of new vertical shoots (water sprouts) along the limbs. Over-thinning weakens the main limbs over time and forces more growth at branch ends.

If water sprouts are really thick on lateral branches, keep some of them.

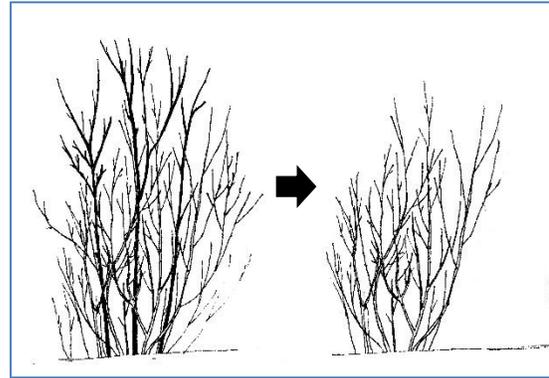
Removal of all the water sprouts from tree limbs stimulates the growth of even more sprouts. To slow down and stop this cycle, thin them out gradually between winter and summer. If the inside of a tree has been over-thinned, some of these shoots should be trained as new small lateral branches. Vertical shoots can be temporarily tied to a 45-degree angle to slow their growth and train them to better form.

"Thinning rules" for multi-stem shrubs.

Thin out selected branches at a point of attachment to match the natural architecture of the plant. Avoid random cuts, stubbed ends, or tip pruning.

Remove the oldest, longest stems to reveal the smaller shrub within.

A consistent size can be easily maintained with fewer pruning cuts made less often. Remove stems as close to soil level as possible, or at a point of attachment on a larger lateral branch far to the inside of the plant.



Prune some things in summer instead of winter.

Summer pruning has a dwarfing affect. Start after the initial rush of leaf and shoot growth has slowed down. Keep it light, as heavy pruning at this time of year can damage plant health. This is a great time to prune for a more subdued growth response on vigorous plants, including:

Water sprouts, basal suckers, and shoots from rootstock on grafted plants: Get them while they are small and cut them cleanly at the point of attachment. That may mean pulling mulch or soil away to get all the way down to the base of the shoots.

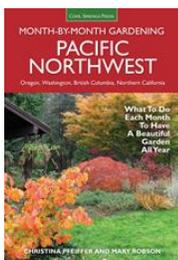
Reverted stems: If variegated or cut-leaf plants are producing branches with big green leaves, remove those entire branches. Don't let that changed growth go; it can take over the rest of the shrub or tree over time.

If you aren't getting the results you intended, change tactics!

If your current method of pruning isn't producing the results you want, it's probably time to change how and/or when you are pruning. Study how plants grew in response to past pruning. Have a good reason or goal before you start (some things may not need pruning). For maintenance of most garden shrubs and trees, a modest amount of selective pruning cuts can serve most pruning goals. With a little practice, you'll soon be pruning less often with greater results!

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