KPOV – *The Point*

Gardening: Get Good at It

“The Why and When of Pruning”

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Pruning is a way of coaxing the very best from a plant. It’s an essential garden task, one that can be as enjoyable as it is important. This quick overview of the ***why*** and ***when*** of pruning will hopefully pique your curiosity to research ***how*** to prune specific plants in your garden.

There are several good reasons to prune plants. First, it makes them healthier. You can discourage disease from gaining purchase by removing limbs that rub against each other, those with jagged ends due to wind or snow damage, or any that have been attacked by insects or disease. Pruning also helps ensure limbs are firmly anchored to the trunk as plants mature thus making them less likely to be damaged by inclement weather.

Removing interior branches and stems lets in more sunlight and improves air circulation. Sunlight alone inhibits the growth of some disease-producing microorganisms; increased sunlight *and* air flow reduce humidity, making the interior branches less hospitable to several diseases.

Maintaining plant size is another key reason to prune. Ideally, if you select plants that won’t grow larger than you want them to, you won’t have this annual chore. But if you’ve inherited plants that are reaching beyond preferred boundaries, you need to prune them. When doing so, be sure to take the plant’s sunlight, water, shelter and natural structure into consideration – and be aware that pruning its roots might be necessary to control its spread and height.

Pruning for beauty, function or whimsy are more reasons to prune. While plants will strive toward their own natural growth habits, they can benefit from annual pruning to enhance that growth. You might want to encourage habits to address a particular landscaping need, such as a dense privacy hedge, or to provide a unique focal point, say, a topiary shape. Of course, wanting a plant to adopt a shape that isn’t in line with its natural habit will mean you will have to spend more time with your pruners throughout the growing season.

Finally, pruning can increase a plant’s “bounty” -- meaning the size and number of blooms and fruits, the density of leaves, the emergence and even color of new shoots. Thoughtful removal of stems channels energy into remaining shoots and buds while simultaneously increasing available sunlight, giving interior or lower branches what they need to grow – and produce - more vigorously.

So ***when*** should you prune? The best answer is *it depends what you’re pruning.* Take the time to research the specific species of plants, especially the evergreens, fruit trees and flowering shrubs and vines in your garden and make a simple chart to schedule the optimum time to prune each one. There are hundreds of online - text and video - and printed resources to consult.

That said, generally speaking, the best time to prune ***deciduous*** ***trees*** is during their dormant period, usually late winter -- from November to March, though dead or diseased branches should be removed as soon as possible. Pruning done at this time has an invigorating effect on tree growth. Pruning done in the early summer, a tree’s peak growth time, tends to slow growth because fewer leaves remain to manufacture nourishment. Avoid pruning trees in the spring as they emerge from dormancy and in the fall when they are preparing for it.

Pay special attention when pruning flowering shrubs. Spring-blooming plants bloom on one-year-old wood that grew the previous summer. If you prune them before they bloom, you will significantly reduce or even eliminate flowering. Summer-flowering shrubs bloom on new wood and should be pruned in late winter or early spring.

For more information on this or any other gardening topic, call the Master Gardeners at 541-548-6088 or go to our website [www.gocomga.com](http://www.gocomga.com) and click on the KPOV tab on the orange bar. This has been Gardening: Get Good at It on KPOV, The Point.

Resources:

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Morton Arboretum, 2019, “Pruning Evergreens,” <https://www.mortonarb.org/trees-plants/tree-and-plant-advice/horticulture-care/pruning-evergreens>

Oregon State University Extension, “Tree Pruning Basics,” [https://extension.oregonstate.edu/crop-production /fruit-trees/tree-pruning-basics](https://extension.oregonstate.edu/crop-production%20%20/fruit-trees/tree-pruning-basics) (Accessed January 2020)

Reich, L., *The Pruning Book,* 2nd Edition,Newtown, CT, The Taunton Press, 2010