



Columbia Nursery

Pruning Basics for Trees and Shrubs

An Educational Guide from Columbia Nursery

Pruning can feel intimidating to many gardeners, but with a few foundational guidelines, you can prune confidently and successfully. While it takes practice and learning over time, understanding the basic principles will help you keep your trees and shrubs healthy, beautiful, and productive.

Why Do We Prune?

- Health: Removing crowded, diseased, or dead branches allows better air flow and sunlight, reducing pest and disease risks.
- Shape & Size: While pruning won't keep a large tree small, it can help manage plant shape and prevent overgrowth in tight spaces.
- Flowering & Fruiting: Some plants bloom or fruit better on new wood. Pruning out old stems encourages new growth and better production.

Choosing the Right Pruning Tool

Bypass Pruners: These are the preferred tool for most gardeners. They work like scissors, with two blades passing by each other for clean cuts. Use for branches under 1/2 inch thick.

Anvil Pruners: These close against a flat surface, often crushing stems. They are not recommended for most live plant pruning.

Loppers: Larger versions of pruners with extended handles for extra reach. Use for branches up to 1.5 inches thick. Bypass loppers are recommended.

Pruning Saws: For branches too large for loppers. Available in various sizes for different needs.

Pole Pruners: Useful for reaching higher branches without a ladder. Often combine a lopper and a saw on an extended pole.

Tool Care Matters

Sharp tools make cleaner cuts, reduce plant stress, and make pruning easier. Learn to sharpen your tools regularly—there are many excellent tutorials online to help you.

Understanding Pruning Cuts

Heading Cuts: Removing the tip of a branch disrupts a plant hormone called auxin. This encourages buds lower on the stem to grow, creating fuller branching.

- Cutting back by one-third stimulates growth from many buds.



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- Cutting back by two-thirds triggers fewer, but more vigorous shoots.
- Heading cuts work the same way whether you're pruning a flower or a tree.

Thinning Cuts: Removing an entire branch at its base or junction reduces density without stimulating new growth. This allows light and air into the plant's center, helping control shape and improving plant health.

When Should You Prune?

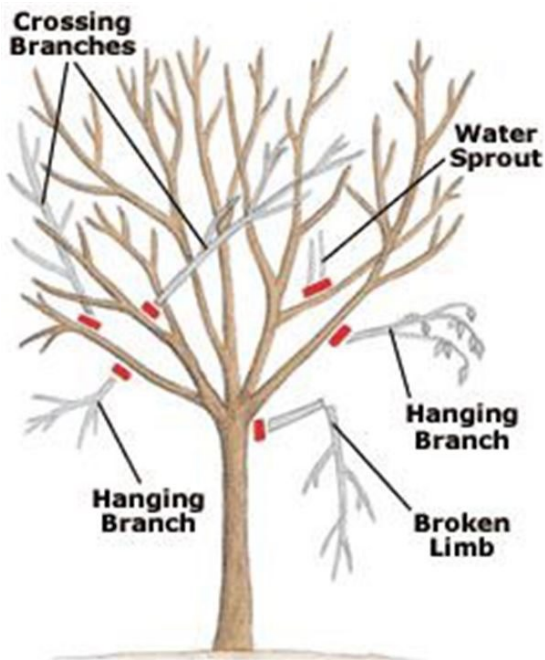
- Late Winter to Early Spring: Most pruning is done during dormancy. This encourages healthy new growth when the plant wakes up.
- During the Growing Season: Light thinning or removal of suckers and water sprouts can be done anytime.
- Avoid heavy pruning late in the growing season, as new growth may not harden off before winter.

How to Make Proper Cuts

- Cut just above a bud at a slanted angle, leaving the bud on the longer side. This protects the bud from drying out.
- On evergreens, make downward-facing angled cuts to hide the pruning wound.
- Never remove more than one-third of the plant's total growth at a time. Plants need enough leaves to photosynthesize and stay healthy.

Need Help?

At Columbia Nursery, we're happy to answer your pruning questions. We offer tools, supplies, and advice to help you keep your trees and shrubs thriving year after year!





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