



Garden Maintenance : Late Winter Pruning

When approaching the task of late winter pruning, gardeners may become overwhelmed or confused by the amount of advice and information offered on “how to prune.” This is unfortunate because late winter pruning is actually quite simple and can be quite beneficial for the health of your plants and the beauty of your landscape. In addition, doing the work and observing the outcomes will teach you more about plant structure and growth patterns. Once you attempt these annual pruning tasks and reap the rewards of late winter pruning, you will be ready to learn more about other, more complicated pruning techniques.

Just to Clarify

Excellent books have been written on pruning – our two favorites are listed at the end of this tip sheet – and we highly recommend investing in one and consulting it often. As your situation changes, you will find that there are parts of your book that have become more relevant. So to be clear, in this tip sheet we will **not** be covering:

- spring-blooming trees and shrubs which should be pruned after flowering;
- selective pruning or shaping of trees and shrubs;
- fruit-tree or berry-bush pruning;
- hard pruning, otherwise known as renewal pruning – for the rejuvenation of an old or overgrown shrub;
- advanced methods of pruning evergreens, roses and woody vines. **All** these topics are covered in your new book!

Pruning Conundrum

It is important to realize with any type of pruning that it both reduces *and* produces growth. This is because pruning stimulates dormant buds below the pruning cut, causing new shoots to emerge. In this way, new growth appears more rapidly and more abundantly than if no pruning was done. On the other hand, even this abundant growth will not immediately equal the mass you have removed by pruning, so your plant *will* be smaller. Health, form and vigor will be the main outcome of any pruning, so a gardener must balance all these factors when approaching any potential pruning job.

General Maintenance Knows No Season

As a reminder, certain minor pruning (less than 10% of the plant mass) may be done at any time of the year, and probably *should* be done. This pruning addresses safety concerns and causes minimal change to the plant itself.

- Keep an eye out for dead, damaged, and diseased branches: prune them out promptly.
- On an ongoing basis, clip out errant branches that stick out awkwardly or encroach pedestrian areas.
- Crossing or rubbing branches should be removed when noticed.
- If you notice foliage that has reverted to an older form in shape, color or variegation, prune out those branches.
- This applies as well to watersprouts (vertical shoots growing at 90°) and suckers (branches arising from rootstock on grafted plants). Keeping up with removal will prevent this vigorous growth from becoming problematic.
- While technically a type of pruning, deadheading flowers, fruit and fruit buds causes minimal changes to the plant and may therefore be timed according to personal tastes.

Now: What Does ‘Late Winter’ Mean?

Gardeners in St. Louis are used to the crazy weather fluctuations at the beginning of spring and often ask when late winter begins and ends for our gardens. If you have the intention to prune a specific plant, it is important to observe its signals. Your winter pruning projects should be timed to take place before dormancy ends. The clearest indication of this is, generally speaking, when leaf buds begin to swell before opening. For us, this means that late winter pruning is done from late February into mid-March – it is very rare for dormancy to end before the first week of March.

Dormant Summer-Blooming Deciduous Shrubs

Here we focus primarily on the shrubs whose **new growth** always looks the best, such as: *Buddleja*, *Callicarpa*, *Caryopteris*, *Hydrangea arborescens*, and the twig *Cornus* and *Salix*. These shrubs leaf out and bloom on new wood and their older stems detract or do not survive winter. Sometimes nature does the pruning, sometimes we need to help it along.

- Lop off **the whole plant** down to 3”-12” above the trunk flare
- Do this just as, and even if, buds are swelling – don’t hesitate to cut off budding branches!
 - This keeps shrubs from becoming lanky and/or twiggy in center and stimulate vigorous regrowth.
 - The greater the vigor, the more flowers and the stronger the foliage.
- After several years of cutting back, the low woody stump will become over-crowded, so
 - cut back some of it to leave room for new shoots.
- And for those shrubs who have died back almost to the ground : cut down to just below the point of winterkill.

Other summer-blooming shrubs that flower on new wood may also be pruned during dormancy in late winter to promote vigorous growth and strong flower buds. This will amount to **thinning** at ground level shrubs such as: *Abelia*, *Clethra*, *Hydrangea paniculata*, *Ilex verticillata* and *Symphoricarpos*. Other reduction in height is an optional choice.

- After completing any minor pruning (see General Maintenance above),
- remove several older, taller branches at ground level – leaving enough to form a framework or armature, then
- working from the top down, remove ¼ to ⅓ of the remaining branches, cutting back to a strong, outward-facing bud.
- To a certain extent, this same technique may be applied to hybrid tea, floribunda and grandiflora roses.

Ornamental Grasses

Most ornamental grasses hold their dried blooms and leaves through winter but are considered deciduous since the new growth will always come up from the root. Depending on the overall size of the plant, they must be cut down to the ground around the first week of March. For smaller plants such as dwarf *Pennisetum* this will be only 1” from the ground. It is more difficult to cut back larger and denser grasses and you may end up with 4”-6” (or slightly more) of old growth.

- Try to get this done before any green growth begins to appear or you will cut off the new leaves.
 - Wear gloves: many grasses have sharp edges.
 - Use bungees or twine to bundle large plants.
 - Loppers or electric hedge shears may be necessary for mature grasses.
- ‘Evergreen’ grasses such as *Carex*, *Festuca* and *Juncus* are treated somewhat differently:
 - Tease out dead blades and selectively trim off any dried tips.
 - Dead leaves of broader-leaved evergreens may be more difficult to tug out, so
 - simply trim off the top ⅓ to ½ to stimulate growth.
- Evergreen *Liriope* is the exception – it needs to be aggressively clipped down to 1” tall, just like the deciduous grasses.

For Further Reading:

Hill, Lewis. Pruning Made Easy. Storey Publishing, 1997

Reich, Lee. The Pruning Book. Taunton Press, 2010

Plant Lists to Help Plan Winter Pruning

These are not exhaustive lists, but examples meant rather to suggest qualities for certain pruning techniques. For detailed information and unlisted plants, the best source is the Plant Finder on Missouri Botanical Garden's website which indicates pruning times and techniques for each plant, as well as exceptions and variations. Some shrubs will even have variations from one species to the next due to budding and flowering differences. Look for phrases such as "prune in late winter," "blooms on new wood," "prune to shape before new growth appears," and "prune close to the ground to revitalize."

Dormant Summer-Blooming Shrubs Whose New Growth Looks Best

Botanical Name	Common Name	Comments
<i>Buddleja davidii</i>	Butterfly Bush	cut by a third in fall; to the ground in spring
<i>Callicarpa</i> spp.	Beautyberry	berries persist into winter
<i>Caryopteris</i> spp.	Bluebeard / Blue-mist Shrub	similar to <i>Buddleja</i> but not as vigorous
<i>Clematis heracleifolia</i> , <i>C. integrifolia</i>	non-vining Clematis	prune as an herbaceous perennial
<i>Cornus alba</i> , <i>C. sanguinea</i> , <i>C. sericea</i>	Tartarian/Bloodtwig/Red-Osier Dogwood	for best color prune hard every few years
<i>Cotinus coggygria</i>	Smokebush	for best foliage prune hard in spring
<i>Diervilla sessifolia</i>	Southern Bush-honeysuckle	prune back older shrubs to improve shape
<i>Hydrangea arborescens</i>	Smooth Hydrangea	often dies back completely to the ground
<i>Hypericum</i> spp.	St. John's Wort	prune back older shrubs to improve shape
<i>Perovskia atriplicifolia</i>	Russian Sage	maintains an appealing winter interest
<i>Rhus typhina</i>	Staghorn Sumac	'Tiger Eyes' is less prone to suckering
<i>Salix</i> spp.	Willow	for best color prune hard every few years
<i>Sambucus nigra</i>	European Elder	prune back older shrubs to improve shape
<i>Sorbaria</i> spp.	False Spirea	prune back older shrubs to improve shape
<i>Spiraea japonica</i>	Japanese Spirea	prune hard for best initial flowering
<i>Vitex agnus-castus</i>	Chaste Tree	similar to <i>Buddleja</i>

Other Dormant Summer-Blooming Shrubs

Botanical Name	Common Name	Comments
<i>Abelia x grandiflora</i>	Abelia	occasionally dies back to the ground
<i>Clethra alnifolia</i>	Summersweet	retain some older stems for a framework
<i>Cotinus coggygria</i>	Smokebush	only remove older stems for best flowering
<i>Hamamelis</i>	Witch Hazel	prune as needed after blooming
<i>Hydrangea paniculata</i>	Panicle Hydrangea	retain some older stems for a framework
<i>Ilex verticillata</i>	Winterberry	berries persist into winter
<i>Symphoricarpos x doorenbosii</i>	Coralberry	berries persist into winter

Deciduous Ornamental Grasses

Botanical Name	Common Name
<i>Andropogon gerardii</i>	Big Blue Stem
<i>Bouteloua curtipendula</i>	Side Oats Grama
<i>Calamagrostis x acutiflora</i>	Feather Reed Grass
<i>Chasmanthium latifolium</i>	River Oats
<i>Cortaderia selloana</i>	Pampas Grass
<i>Eragrostis</i> spp.	Love Grass
<i>Fargesia</i> spp.	Clumping Bamboo
<i>Leymus arenarius</i>	Blue Lime Grass
<i>Miscanthus sinensis</i>	Maiden Grass
<i>Muhlenbergia</i> spp.	Muhly Grass
<i>Panicum</i> spp.	Switchgrass
<i>Pennisetum</i> spp.	Fountain Grass
<i>Phyllostachys</i> spp.	Running Bamboo
<i>Schizachyrium scoparium</i>	Little Bluestem
<i>Sorghastrum nutans</i>	Indian Grass
<i>Sporobolus heterolepis</i>	Prairie Dropseed

Evergreen Ornamental Grasses

Botanical Name	Common Name
<i>Acorus gramineus</i>	Sweet Flag
<i>Carex</i> spp.	Sedge
<i>Festuca</i> spp.	Blue Fescue
<i>Hakonechloa</i>	Hakone Grass
<i>Juncus</i> spp.	Rush
<i>Liriope</i> spp.	Lilyturf
<i>Ophiopogon</i>	Mondo Grass