

Snohomish County Master Gardener Basic Pruning

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Basic Pruning - making the right cut

Pruning is the intentional wounding of a plant, and yet it is also a tool that can help cultivate a healthy, beautiful tree or shrub. Pruning should be performed only when necessary and always according to an established plan. Doing so will minimize the short-term harm and maximize the long-term benefit to the plant.

Reasons to Prune Trees and Shrubs

- **Health**
 - Trees or shrubs with diagnosed diseases should be pruned to remove the infected branches reducing the chance to spread.
 - Airborne diseases can be reduced or even prevented by pruning to increase air circulation through the interior canopy of a plant.
 - Insect localized infestation can be removed to prevent the spread of decay organisms into living tissue.
- **Safety**
 - There may be situations where a tree or shrub poses a hazard of a falling branch, obstruction of sight, or a fire hazard that pruning can resolve.
- **Wildfire**
 - Branches should be pruned so they are 15–30 feet from roofs and chimneys.
 - Tall trees should have lower branches pruned up to at least ten feet from the ground.
 - Understory vegetation should be thinned or removed
- **Structure**
 - Prune plants to form a strong structure that is less likely to fail under stresses like high winds or heavy snows.
 - Features of good structure include having a dominant central leader with proper spacing between lateral branches.
- **Helps Fruit Trees**
 - Proper pruning allows enough vegetative growth to support plant health and produce fruit.
- **Pruning for Special Effect**
 - Plants are sometimes pruned for special visual effects, rather than working with their natural shape.
- **Pruning for Size**
 - Remove portions of plants that have overgrown the area where they are planted.
 - Pruning removes a problem and directs future growth.

Pruning Methods

- **Natural target pruning**
 - One of the key elements of proper pruning is to make each cut in a way that minimizes harm to the tree and reduces the risk of disease or decay entering the tree through the wound.
 - This is done by making the pruning cut in a location, usually just outside the branch collar that leaves intact some significant tissue on the remaining branch or trunk.
- **The Three-Cut Pruning Method for larger branches**
- **Step 1: The Undercut**

- The first cut is the undercut which is made about a foot away from the branch union. This cut should be less than 1/4 the diameter of the branch on the underside. Pruning cuts made without an undercut can lead to tearing of bark and trunk tissue.
- Step 2: Through Cut
 - This cut is a little further out on the branch of the undercut cut from top to bottom removing the majority of the branch.
- Step 3: Finish Cut
 - Cut outside the branch collar being careful not to remove or damage collar tissue. Leave smooth edges.

Resources

Kohlhauff, T. Reasons to Prune Trees and Shrubs In Home Gardens. Washington State University Publication FS182E. Washington State University.

<https://pubs.extension.wsu.edu/home-pruning-reasons-to-prune-trees-and-shrubs-home-gardening-series>

Ball, J., and A. Kiesz. The Basics of Tree Pruning. South Dakota Arborists Association. 2008.

<http://www.sdarborists.com/education/The-Basics-of-Tree-Pruning.pdf>

Home Pruning: Reasons to Prune Trees and Shrubs (Home Gardening Series). WSU Publications. Factsheet

FS182E. <https://pubs.extension.wsu.edu/>

Pruning Equipment for Home Gardeners (Home Garden Series). WSU Publications. FS131E

<https://pubs.extension.wsu.edu/>

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