

When it comes to your shrubs and trees, it might just be that a snip at the right time saves your pine. After all, gardening experts will be the first to tell you that pruning—or cutting away dead and dense growth—is a perfect way to invigorate your plant. But they'll also tell you it's important to prune at the right season and in the right way otherwise your plant could be exposed to disease and decay.

Pruning makes your shrubs and trees healthier because they allow the root system to support less top. It also allows more light to reach the interior portions of the plant so that stems are stronger and growth is fuller.

There are three methods of pruning to consider: tip pruning, thinning and shearing. Tip pruning is considered the simplest method, because it involves merely trimming back wayward stems at an angle with pruning shears. Thinning, meanwhile, involves using lopping shears to remove entire older stems and branches where they split from the main trunk to preserve a shrub's or tree's natural shape, and rejuvenate older plants by allowing light into their interior and space for new growth. Finally, shearing requires hedge clippers or shears to create formal hedges with sharp-edged, even sides.

Other rules of thumb:

- Remove damaged, dead branches at any time of year with a sharp, clean saw.
- Pinch off the ends of branches that are growing too long.
- Remove suckers—strong, fast developing shoots that grow straight up from roots or branches—from the main stem.
- Remove flowers once they fade. Otherwise the total number of flowers produced will be significantly reduced.
- In the second season of growth, cut back weak or spindly growth to strengthen your shrub.
- Remove any dead, damaged branches you missed during regular maintenance. If the bark is rubbed through where two branches meet, cut the weaker or inward growing branch to the base.

However, pruning doesn't help your plant if you don't do it in the right season. Flowering shrubs should be pruned immediately after they have bloomed so they can have the entire summer to develop flower buds for the next season. Otherwise you'll eliminate the flowers they might bear.

Meanwhile, summer flowering shrubs should be pruned in early to mid spring. Focus on pruning the shrub's tender, new growth once every spring because the best blooms and foundation come from the older, stronger branches. Finally, prune ornamental and fruit trees, as well as shrubs, during their dormant seasons in order to prevent disease and insect problems.

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