Pruning Evergreens

By Susan Camp

Discussion of tree and shrub pruning would be incomplete if we neglected to examine some basics of evergreen pruning. Native and exotic, mostly Asian, species of evergreens are found in yards all over the Middle Peninsula. Whether native or introduced, evergreens have growth habits and pruning needs that are different from those of deciduous trees. Evergreens are plants that retain their leaves throughout the winter. Most have needles or scale-like leaves and seed-bearing cones. These trees and shrubs are called conifers. Other evergreens, like Southern magnolia, live oak, and evergreen holly are broad-leaved evergreens.

Evergreens grow best in their natural form, and most evergreens seldom need pruning, except to remove dead, damaged, or diseased wood. Make thinning cuts to remove branches at a 45 to 60 angle just beyond the branch collar. If a branch is diseased, disinfect tools between cuts with isopropyl alcohol; the old-fashioned brown mouthwash; or the household cleaner that contains benzalkonium chloride. Pine cleaners and chlorine bleach will corrode metal tools.

Large limbs that overhang houses and other structures or power lines should be removed by a certified arborist, as should tall pines and other large trees.

As you can see, basic pruning technique for evergreens is the same as that for deciduous trees, but knowledge of the growth habits of different evergreens is necessary if you are to avoid drastic, or even deadly, pruning mistakes.

Conifers are grouped by the arrangement of their branches. Pines, firs, and spruces are whorl-branched evergreens, meaning that the shoots form a circular growth pattern around the branch tip. Arborvitae, cedar, and juniper are random-branching evergreens. New growth in these trees arises from the buds that were formed on the tips of twigs the previous year, although some species produce growth on both old and new wood.

Most evergreens have a central leader, which can be pruned to control tree height or increase branch density. If the leader is lost to weather or other damage, you can train a new leader by vertically splinting the highest lateral branch and pruning all laterals just below it. Remove the splints after one season.

Pines should be pruned in the spring to increase density as new growth appears. Most pine buds appear at the terminal tip, producing a new shoot called a "candle." Pinch candles back 1/3 to ½ of their length to produce a more compact appearance. Don't shear pines, and avoid pruning back to woody stems, as they will not produce new shoots.

Firs and spruces require little pruning, although bottom branches will die over time, and can be removed. To develop a formal shape, prune in the spring, after new growth appears.

Prune arborvitae in early spring to midsummer. New buds are concealed in the branch crotches, allowing heavy pruning and shearing. Lower the height of arborvitae by removing no more than 20% and shape the plant by lightly pruning the tips of branches.

Junipers come in upright, spreading, creeping, and pyramidal growth habits. Junipers develop a dead zone in the center due to lack of light. Never prune or shear into this area, as new growth will not appear. The native Eastern red cedar (Juniperus virginiana) is a juniper.

True cedars include the drooping Deodar cedar (Cedrus deodara), a Himalayan native. Deodars rarely need more than maintenance pruning. Like junipers, cedars have a dead zone in the center.

The best pruning months for broad-leaved evergreens are November through February, although winter pruning can decrease spring flowering on Southern magnolias, since they set buds on old wood. Removal of spent flowers will stimulate new growth. Pruning evergreen hollies while they are blooming will decrease berry production.

Helpful articles about pruning evergreens include Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publications 430-457 "A Guide to Successful Pruning: Pruning Evergreen Trees" and 430-461 "Evergreen Tree Pruning Calendar" and The Morton Arboretum article "Pruning Evergreens."

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