

Spring Is Pruning Season!

By Susan Camp

Late winter on the Middle Peninsula follows an uncertain path: one day the temperature barely hits 35°, and the next day hovers around 70° F. Daffodils sprout up, tiny leaves pop out, buds on hydrangeas appear, and then the temperature plummets below freezing for the next week and the buds turn black and shrivel up. The dilemma for property owners is whether to begin pruning trees and shrubs now or to wait for longer stretches of warming weather.

At the recent Tree Forum, sponsored by the Gloucester and Mathews/Middlesex Master Gardeners and Tree Stewards, the presenters discussed this important issue. The only hard and fast rule seems to be that we can't control Mother Nature; however, pruning guidelines and calendars for deciduous and evergreen shrubs and trees are available on the Virginia Cooperative Extension website at <https://pubs.ext.vt.edu>, or you can simply Google "vce pubs."

February 15 through March 15 is considered the prime pruning period for many tree and shrub varieties in our region. If you miss these dates by a few days or a week, your trees and shrubs will survive. The worst that might happen is that you will have fewer blossoms on flowering shrubs and trees, or that the plant will not have the aesthetically pleasing shape you were attempting to achieve this year.

Pruning should be a part of regular plant maintenance. Pruning can improve a plant's health; reshape and revive an old plant or train a new plant; control size; improve or increase flower or fruit production; and remove or decrease the size of plants that could cause injury or property damage.

Time of pruning varies from species to species, but using the correct tools safely applies to all pruning. Various sizes and types of hand pruners, loppers, shears, and pruning saws are appropriate tools. Buy good quality tools that will last. Keep tools clean, oiled, and sharp. Disinfect tools between cuts if plants are diseased, and between plants if no disease is found. Isopropyl alcohol; the old-fashioned brown mouthwash; and the household cleaner with the active ingredient benzalkonium chloride are good choices for tool disinfection. Pine cleaners and chlorine bleach will corrode metal tools.

In general, a chainsaw is not a good pruning tool, especially if the gardener is standing several feet in the air on a ladder. Aside from the obvious peril to the operator, a chainsaw leaves a ragged wound in the plant tissue that can lead to increased opportunities for infection and insect infestation. A chainsaw may be necessary if the branch to be pruned is greater than 3 inches in diameter, but the operator must have experience with using a chainsaw.

If you need to stand on a ladder, always have an assistant to hold it steady. Take care when cutting branches above your head; a head injury on pruning day is not desirable. Use eye protection to avoid injury from airborne sawdust and bark. Contact a certified arborist for large tree removal or pruning.

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Basic pruning techniques apply to all deciduous shrubs and trees. First, remove dead and damaged twigs and branches; you can do this any time of year. Next, prune any branches that cross each other or rub together. Remove suckers at the base of deciduous trees and shrubs and “water sprouts”, the straight, vertical, whip-like branches that grow from previously pruned sites. Finally, prune to achieve the size and shape you want.

Avoid pruning branches and twigs flush with the trunk. Instead, make your pruning cut at a 45° to 60° angle in front of the branch collar, which is the swollen or bumpy area at the base of a branch. Leaving the branch collar intact helps the wound to heal more quickly and deter disease and decay.

Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE) Publication 430-455 “A Guide to Successful Pruning: Pruning Basics and Tools” provides further information on the topic. Next week’s column will examine the best times and techniques for deciduous tree and shrub pruning.