

## For Gardeners Looking for Chores

On these sunny, not too cold days, we look for an excuse to work outside. Armed with loppers we head toward the shrubs, intending to improve the situation. Sadly, we are just as likely to do more harm than good. To prune or not to prune is a year-round question.

Shrubs have a way of exceeding their allotted space so pruning can be necessary. Depending on the time of dormancy, shrubs can be thinned out by removing the oldest canes at soil level. The canes can also be shortened to improve their appearance. If you have roses wildly waving their limbs about in every stiff breeze, you can cut them back to a manageable length. I have a pair of 'Knock Out' shrubs that I think have been growing non-stop since summer. I plan to trim them back to 3' x 3' the next sunny day.

A yellow rose, 'Baby Love', that I bought as a miniature is five feet tall and could be improved by shaping with the pruners. I am reluctant to cut it back until the weather settles down to March because it is showing new growth now that, if encouraged by pruning, may be harmed by winter's last cold breath?

Another shrub that is more vigorous than intended is the oakleaf hydrangea, *H. quercifolia*. The conical flowers are whitish, aging to pink: the leaves do indeed resemble oak leaves and in autumn they color to a deep rose. Unlike the *H. macrophylla* that flowers on old wood and should be pruned after flowering, the *H. quercifolia* can be pruned late winter, early spring. *H. arborescens*, also called smooth hydrangea, can also be cut back to two or so feet tall, if you'd like. This is the old-fashioned shrub with the white flowers that bloom on new growth and often flop over from sheer exuberance so by cutting them back you encourage them to stand up straight. 'Annabelle' and her charming relatives belong to this group and have profited from improved breeding. The newer sorts are less floppy and more compact and have a more expansive color palette.

The *H. paniculata* also can be pruned late winter, early spring. This species, too, is mostly white and cream, or was until 'Limelight' appeared in all its glory. It is large but if you do not have space for it you will be happy to know that a newer version, called 'Little Lime' is now available. This treasure reaches a mere three to five feet.

This is the time of year we inadvertently rip out nestled perennials by grabbing at the straw above them, not recognizing the weathered remnants. Break away the debris gently or if seedpods remain, leave them for the birds until new growth appears. Two other plants that prefer to be left alone until new growth appears are Russian sage, *Perovskia atriplicifolia*, and Lantana. Some gardeners have great luck with *Perovskia* with its silvery grey-green foliage and small tubular blue flowers marching up the stem. My efforts to date have produced sad specimens. Experts say this plant does tolerate poor soil, dry and alkaline soil and coastal conditions, but it shows little tolerance for Gloucester Courthouse. *Perovskia* can be cut back when the buds begin to break to its earlier framework. Lantana, too, may be cut back once the new growth is seen emerging from the base.

**The season for seeds** is arriving. Such a delight when tiny leaves pop out of the planting mix. All the catalogs have well designed set-ups for making your efforts successful. Those with the greenest thumbs do well with rolled newspaper and egg cartons but so many of us need all the help we can get.

Even renowned gardeners have raised their own plants from seed. In her garden at Sissinghurst, Vita Sackville-West grew pansies and dianthus from seed as well as a blue daisy, *Felicia amelloides*, an exquisite little flower for regions south of here. Another flower we love and find difficult is the florist favorite, long lasting *Alstromeria*. Sackville-West advised growing them from seed and to sow it in early spring where you wanted it to grow. They have brittle roots and that makes any transplanting 'iffy'. The *Ligtu* hybrids are most likely to succeed. Growing plants from seed worth a try, even the failures are fun.