

Fearless Pruning

Not just people are prone to overweight! After such copious rains I have fat shrubs, spreading over their allotted spaces as well as into walkways and driveways. Part of the problem is my misunderstanding of “medium”. Four to five feet said the tag: seven or eight feet is the reality of Loropetalum Chinese ‘Rubra’. I hauled quantities of its limbs to the compost pile wondering if I were killing it.

As is too common, I did the research after the fact! Loropetalum belongs to the shrub group that survives being cut back to the base. The reason I have not tried to do that is that neither my loppers nor I can neatly whack off a stem larger than an inch in diameter.

We have all read about waiting until a plant is dormant before taking the clippers to it. Some uncooperative plants refuse to go dormant until it is cold outside. Getting up and going to work on time must be done regardless of the weather. Pruning is optional. Despite advice to the contrary, you can prune on a pretty day and enjoy yourself without killing a shrub.

Some evergreen and deciduous trees and some deciduous shrubs that flower on previous or current year’s growth need little pruning. You can cut away any dead, diseased, or crossing limbs or any growth spoiling the symmetry. If the particular tree or shrub has a lot of sap, it is best to prune it in winter, early spring or late fall.

Deciduous shrubs such as flowering quince or kerria that flower in spring or early summer can be shaped after they flower. If those such as forsythia, butterfly bush, or mock orange are getting too rangy they can be selectively cut back to strong buds after flowering. If they need better air circulation, cut up to 1/5 to 1/3 of the old canes off at the ground. Pruning them from the top so they resemble fireplugs is as aesthetically challenging as murdering crepe myrtles- a fineable offense?

If you wish to cut back butterfly bushes or Caryopteris or Perovskia, you can cut them down to their low permanent framework as the buds begin to swell in early spring. For subshrubs such as Perovskia and Lantana, you really have to wait until the buds are obviously swelling before cutting or you may kill them.

A TIP: This is the month when a gorgeous array of plants are screaming, “Take me home!” First, ask yourself where precisely and exactly are you going to put this pretty thing? Second, gently ease the plant from its container and check the roots. If it is root bound, with roots curling around the bottom of the pot, return it to the shelf. If you simply must have it anyway, plant it with care. Dig a hole shallow and wide, shake off the potting soil and spread out the roots. Be careful not to plant it too deeply. If it seems to sit too high, spread mulch around it. Mediterranean plants like lavender loathe soggy feet and can be mulched with small stones to improve drainage rather than with materials such as pine nuggets that hold water.

Plants that love bogs can be pleased to have a small dam of dirt surrounding them to hold the moisture. Unless your garden soil closely resembles potting soil don't just plop a plant into a hole. Those roots aren't going to spread into 'foreign' territory. Some gardeners actually dunk the little plant in a bucket of water to remove the potting soil. I haven't added this ritual to the chore but I do shake a lot of it off and pull out the roots. It would be interesting to buy identical plants and try a different planting technique with each. And notice any difference. And remember which was planted how. And write it down somewhere. And not lose the notes.

GOOD FOOD NEWS: Universities and foundations are working together to develop a way that subsistence farmers in developing countries have the opportunity to use newly developed seed resources that benefit them and the environment. For example, cassava (manioc), the starchy tuberous root of a tropical tree, is used as a drought-resistant staple for 800 million people in Africa and Latin America, even in parts of Asia. Unfortunately this starchy root is greatly deficient in protein, vitamins, and other nutrients.

The Gates foundation funded a project to improve the nutrition of cassava. Field trials are currently taking place in Kenya and Nigeria. News like this keeps all of us hoping that science can improve lives worldwide.