

To prune or not to prune....

This time of year I often hear people say, 'Gotta prune now, gotta prune!' Before you pick up those loppers and begin that pruning ritual, ask yourself why you want to cut on that poor plant. There are actually different reasons for pruning. Removal of shoots and branches can control plant growth or improve health, appearance, fruiting, and flowering.

If you find yourself pruning a plant often just to maintain size, consider replacing it with a smaller growing species or a dwarf plant. Consult with your nurseryman or call the county extension office for suggestions. Using the right plant in the right place will not only save you time and energy, but it will decrease the amount of plant material being sent to the landfill.

To improve the health and appearance of your plants, always remove the dead and damaged wood. If branch tips are newly infested with disease or insects, you may be able to eliminate the need for spraying unfriendly chemicals by removing and discarding those shoots. Check your plants often so you can take care of these small problems before they become big ones that are costly to you and the environment.

Timing is everything when it comes to flowering trees and shrubs. Spring flowering plants bloom on growth that they put on last year. During last season, they set the buds that will soon open into the beautiful flowers that we are anxiously awaiting. Avoid doing any size or shape pruning until after you enjoy those flowers in the spring. After spring bloomers like Redbuds, viburnum, and azaleas have flowered, pruning will actually force more new shoots which will eventually set buds for next year. More is good when it comes to flowers in the garden, so prune those beauties back lightly.

Later blooming plants flower on the new growth from the current year. That means that new growth this coming spring will quickly set buds for summer flowers. To get more blooms on plants such as crape myrtle, hibiscus, gardenias, holly, and butterfly bushes, prune in late winter up until just before the flush of new growth begins. This will force more branching and lots of fresh new budding wood for abundant summer flowers. Since plants live to produce seed, sometimes you can coax them into keep trying. Right after the first bloom, trim off faded blooms and you may be rewarded by another spectacular display of flowers.

When you prune your plants can also affect how much your plant grows. Generally, pruning just before spring growth will force more branching and overall growth. Growth will be slowed, however, when you prune right after a flush of growth. This may be helpful when deciding when to prune your non-bloomers and hedge plants. Avoid late summer pruning and early winter pruning because the flush of growth that follows pruning won't be able to take early freezes or our typical nasty winter weather.

For more information about pruning, call the UF Master Gardeners on Tuesday and Thursday mornings at 752-5384, or visit the UF/IFAS website <http://solutionsforyourlife.com> To learn more about the new Master Gardener training class, call 752-5384.

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