

Pruning trees and shrubs during the dormant season can seem like a daunting task, but it is an important practice for the health and vigor of many trees and shrubs. Pruning is done to reduce size, shape the plant, increase flower or fruit production, or promote sound structure.

### When to Prune

The correct time to prune deciduous shrubs and trees is determined by the plant's growth habit, bloom time, and health or condition. The timing of pruning will depend on the species. Any time is a good time to remove dead, dying, or broken branches.

Sanitize tools between plants with a 10% bleach solution or undiluted 70% isopropyl alcohol. Sanitize between each cut if a disease is suspected.



**FIG. 1.** Rejuvenation method on spirea. Photo: Sarah Vogel

### Spring Flowering Shrubs

Spring flowering shrubs, such as lilac or forsythia, will bloom on growth from the last growing season, sometimes called old wood. The best time to prune a healthy plant is immediately after flowering in spring. Overgrown shrubs may need more extensive pruning through rejuvenation or renewal methods in late winter or early spring. Heavy pruning methods can lead to fewer blooms for a few years but will improve the overall health and lifespan of the shrub.

### Summer Blooming Shrubs

Summer blooming shrubs, those that bloom after July 1, produce blooms on the current year's growth. These are best pruned in late winter or early spring. Do not prune deciduous shrubs in the late summer, as that will encourage a flush of new growth that will not have the opportunity to harden off before winter, leaving the plants susceptible to frost damage and dieback.

### Deciduous Trees

Many of the rules for pruning shrubs also apply to deciduous trees. Most trees, including fruit trees, respond well to late winter pruning. Working on trees in the dormant season gives the pruner an increased visibility of the tree's shape without any leaves and enough time for proper wound closure for the plant.

When branches are cut correctly at the node or the branch collar, the plant will seal wounds properly to prevent the spread of decay and entry for potential pests and pathogens.

### Exceptions to Early Spring Pruning

- To reduce the spread of oak wilt disease, oak trees should not be pruned from March through October.
- River birch responds best to late fall or early winter cuts after leaves have fallen and when sap flow is reduced.



**FIG. 2.** Pruning a yew. Photo: Sarah Vogel

## Evergreen Trees and Shrubs

Pruning techniques on evergreens vary depending on the species and desired effect. Fall pruning is not recommended for evergreens, as any new growth will be susceptible to winter injury. Evergreen shrubs such as juniper and yew can be pruned in March or April before new growth emerges. Evergreen trees such as pine, spruce, and fir generally require very little pruning and removing lower branches is not advisable as it compromises the tree's structural integrity.

## Spruce and Fir Trees

Spruce and fir trees have lateral buds on the newest growth. These buds grow from the sides of the branches, not the ends. Prune back to these lateral buds in early spring to create a more dense form.

## Pine Trees

Pines only grow from terminal buds at the end of the branch. Pines are pruned at the candle stage in spring or early summer by removing two-thirds of the elongated bud. Do not cut branches back to older growth, as they will not develop new growth from those areas.

## Topping Trees

Topping trees is the removal of large amounts of leaves and branches from a tree's crown. This technique is a very harmful tree pruning practice. Topped trees become stressed unhealthy trees, vulnerable to insects and diseases, with weak limbs and disfigured growth.

Topping trees is not recommended.

## Additional Resources

For additional resources, including mulching techniques, planting guides, and more, visit [extension.illinois.edu/plants/infosheets](https://extension.illinois.edu/plants/infosheets)

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