

Pruning

Forest trees need little or no help to stay healthy but landscape and fruiting trees need some help to stay healthy and productive. Pruning should be corrective as thinning out for no reason will not improve the tree or shrub.

Pruning is one of those things that can seem a bit scary but is actually easier than you think and can improve the yield of your trees and bushes.

Time of year is important.

Summer is not good for deciduous trees and shrubs as you are removing food reserves from the green leaves whereas in autumn and winter the food reserves are sent to the roots. Some plants favour autumn pruning as opposed to spring pruning and vice versa. Even within species, for example, roses, some varieties prefer one season rather than the other, so best to check from the plant label when you buy it or check on the internet. However, as a rule of thumb if you plant July to October then you prune the plants in spring. If you plant November to June, prune immediately after flowering.

Evergreen plants on the other hand can be pruned after flowering. If the plant needs a lot of work this can be done near the end of winter going into spring, before it starts to grow.

Newly planted trees and shrubs only tend to need light touch pruning. However, it is worth pruning from early on in a plant's life and pruning annually. You should then find that as the tree matures it needs little work to keep it healthy.

The challenge for many of us is **how much to prune**. It's fine if the trees and bushes are still young, but if the plant has got away from us, it's got too big, it's lost its shape and produced so many branches that they are growing into each other, it will need a bit of courage. Ideally, a bird should be able to fly easily through a tree. So, have a look and see what you think. It should give you a good idea of how much work is needed, also remembering that if branches are rubbing against each other we are leaving the plant more open to disease.

How we prune depends on the plant. Again, it is worth doing a bit of research into the plant if you are not sure as there are many useful resources on-line to help keep you right. But there are some useful rules of thumb:

- **Spring pruning of shrubs:** prune growth from the previous year to two or three buds above healthy thick stems. It gives the new growth a good basis on which to thrive
- **Summer pruning of shrubs:** take the stems on which the plant has flowered back to a strong upright shoot low down. If branches are old and did not flower well, take them out. Take out one in approximately three stems, again taking it low

- **Pruning evergreens:** deadhead and cut back to healthy outward facing buds. Take out anything that looks dead, unhealthy or a bit straggly. Then stand back and have a look to see that it has a good shape
- **Light pruning for new plants:** you should only need to take out shoots that are crossing over, which don't look too healthy or which have been damaged. It is usually a good idea to mulch them and give them a good feed, at the same time

In fact, after most pruning, it is a good idea to mulch and feed the plant

If the tree or shrub needs a lot of work, the following needs to happen:

Deciduous trees and shrubs:

Some hard core work might be needed but if you can improve the plant, it should only need a little bit of work annually thereafter. This work should be done between November and March. It may be that the work cannot be done all at once. If the plant is in poor shape to begin with, and there is the chance that you might lose the plant in any case, it is worth considering whether it would be better to replace it.

Hard pruning should stimulate new growth, but a fruit tree might need a year or two to become productive again.

- As a start take out all the stems on a shrub from the ground up to 20cm, for a tree, up to 45cm.
- Feed and mulch.
- If the tree is poor, pruning can be carried out over a period of up to three years.
- Year one, take out any branches that should not be there, i.e. dead/diseased, crossing and rubbing. Cut back any older stems/branches by up to a half until you get to healthy growth. If it is a shrub you should be taking out up to a half of the plant in total.
- Year two, if there are a lot of new shoots, thin them back and cut back older branches
- Year three, take out any of the older stems which are still there. Mulch and feed well in the spring

Evergreen trees and shrubs:

Late winter, early spring is a good time or just after flowering for a plant that flowers early in the year. Vigorous shrubs in good health can be cut back almost to ground level. Others can be done over several years.

Spring-time lightly prune the whole shrub, late summer prune back harder to keep the shape and size you want

Please note that it is important that you do not cut branches back to stubs or the lateral branches (a lateral branch is a secondary branch that grows off the main trunk). It can stress a tree and lead to decay and instability.

Pruning for productivity

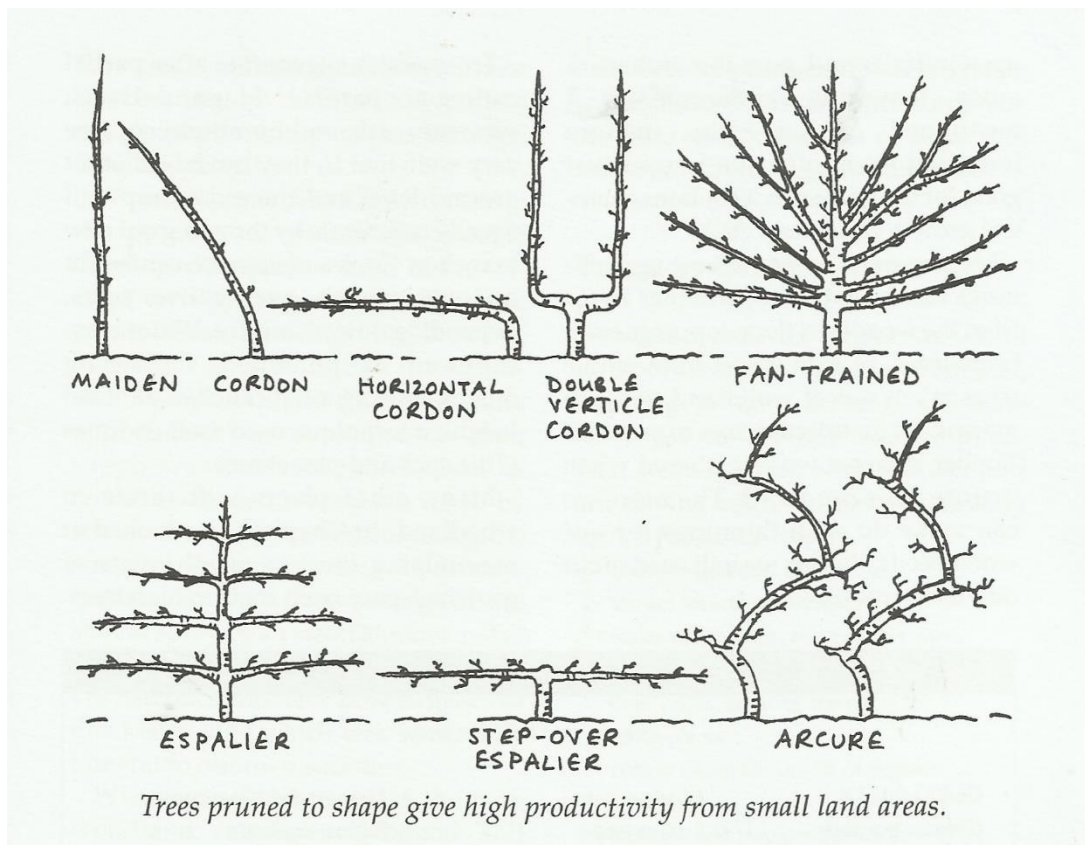


Image courtesy of Graham Bell, The Permaculture Garden

One reason for pruning in fruit trees is to maximise yield, especially where space is limited.

Maiden - a single stemmed young tree, ranging from 1-2 metres tall

Cordon - a single stem with short side shoots usually trained to 45 degrees but can be horizontal (stepover) or double

Fan trained - multiple branches from near the base. These trees generally need a spacing of not less than 8', and a usable height of 6' or more.

Espalier - grown flat against a wall or a free-standing trellis.

Arcure - trained on a trellis in a succession of arcs

Coppicing

Coppicing is a specialist pruning technique where a tree, or shrub, is cut to ground level. It results in regeneration of multiple new stems from the base. If you are growing trees for fuel, coppicing is a highly effective method of producing a great deal of fast growing timber without the need to plant new trees. Since coppiced trees already have a fully developed root system, regrowth is rapid.

Coppicing:

- creates a multi-stemmed rather than a large single-trunked tree or bush
- generates new stems on shrubs with good winter stem colour (such as dogwoods and some willows)
- creates multiple woody stems for firewood or charcoal making
- can rejuvenates old shrubs and hedging plants, especially ones that tolerate hard pruning, such as yew, hornbeam, and beech

Pollarding

Pollarding is a specialist pruning technique which keeps trees and shrubs smaller than they would naturally grow. It is started once a tree or shrub reaches the desired height, and thereafter annual pollarding will restrict the plant to that height.

Pollarding:

- Prevents trees, and shrubs, outgrowing their allotted space
- can reduce the shade cast by a tree
- may be necessary to prevent trees damaging overhead structures such as electric wires

To pollard a shrub cut the main stem at the desired height, a mass of stems will grow from the top

To pollard a tree, leave a trunk supporting three or five branches. Cut back these branches to the desired length and new growth appears at these ends

Crown Pruning

Tree crown reduction is the process of removing branch tips by pruning back to a growth point further down the branch. This is carried out to remove dead, diseased, and damaged branches, or to reduce the overall size of the tree. Crown reductions can also be considered when the root system of a large, mature tree has damage which is making it potentially hazardous. This type of pruning is usually associated with large trees and typically involves the services of specialist tree surgeons.