

Pruning is a garden chore you either love or hate. Some gardeners adore pruning. A friend annually prunes the small decorative yews flanking her front porch. She patiently hand trims each branch; she wants to make sure the trees are perfect. There is something Zen-like about pruning. But many have another viewpoint: A Weed-Whacker is the perfect pruning tool.

Like it or hate it, pruning makes plants healthier and prettier. Spring is a perfect time to prune some plants before blooming. You'll want to wait, though, till early bloomers provide their annual show. Prune too early and oops, no flowers. Lilacs, forsythia, weigela, bridal wreaths and other flowering shrubs should be pruned after flowering.

"Shrubs that will bloom in the spring should not be pruned now," says Sharon Yiesla, horticulture educator in Lake County for the University of Illinois Extension. "They formed their flower buds last summer and, if they are pruned now, spring flowering will be greatly reduced."

Once the flowers are gone, grab the clippers. Yiesla recommends that gardeners "prune selectively." One type of pruning is called "thinning." Thinning cuts are made at the branch base, stimulating new growth and lowering the shrub height.

"This type of pruning is perfect for shrubs with several medium-to-large stems emerging from the ground, like old-fashioned lilac and red twig dogwoods."

Another pruning technique is "heading back." No, that doesn't mean going back to the house for a cool drink.

Heading back, Yiesla explains, means that "...only a portion of a branch is removed back to a side branch or bud." Doing so at different heights "helps to open the shrub to sunlight and air circulation, which can reduce disease problems and enhance future flowering," she says. Pruning sites don't need to be sealed or painted.

Boxwood hedges, for example, benefit from pruning that leaves the base slightly wider than the top, which allows more sunlight to encourage growth, and keeps the boxwood from having a "thin" leafy appearance.

Some blooming shrubs, like Butterfly Bush, benefit from early spring pruning, resulting in bushier plants and more flowers. These popular butterfly magnets can be cut to about 6 inches to 10 inches tall, preferably before leaves start showing.

Other plants, such as clematis, are pruning mysteries solved only if you know the variety. The variety dictates when it should be pruned. I've trimmed the unknown light purple clematis that came with our house early, late, and not at all. It's nearly died, yet other springs, it thrived after its haircut. Nowadays, I prune part of the Unknown Clematis somewhat severely, and let the other branches stay as is. It has survived, but has never achieved that gorgeous, flower-filled appearance as other clematis. The pruning solution: Know your clematis variety.

Spring also is the time to prune roses. Some gardeners swear that waiting blooming forsythias are nature's hint to start pruning. Others just wait till the weather is nice to deal with roses.

Start by removing dead or nearly dead canes. These will be the ones that are black, dark brown or shriveled. Remove thin weak canes. If a cane is skinnier than a pencil, chop chop. Make pruning cuts at a 45-degree angle about ¼ inch above outward-facing buds, recommends U. of I. Extension. Angle the cuts away from the bud. If there is sucker growth (on a grafted rose), remove it by digging down to the root and tearing it off. Cutting just encourages more suckers.

It's time to remove dead branches, flower heads and plant debris from perennials such as peonies, sedum, and prairie coneflower. Clip off dry daylily leaves and stems, the brown leaf tips of iris, the collar of dead leaves that sometimes stays with columbine and heuchera. Once the birds are no longer interested in the shriveled fruit of highbush cranberries, it's OK to remove the berry clusters and their skinny support stems, which eventually keel over anyway. The foliage of ornamental grasses—and fussy plants such as lavender and gas plant—should be cut back to about 4 inches to 6 inches, preferably before growth begins.

This is just a snippet about pruning. For additional information, contact your local University of Illinois Extension office, or check the U of I Extension website, www.extension.uiuc.edu/ogle or the Hort Corner at <http://www.urbanext.uiuc.edu>. The Ogle County office is at 421 W. Pines Rd., Suite 10, Oregon, 815/732-2191.

The Ogle County gardening Hotline, 815/732-2191, is available from

9 a.m. until noon on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays from May 1 to September 30. Master Gardeners will be available to help answer your gardening questions.

--By Helen Sierra, University of Illinois Master Gardener, Ogle County