

Bluestem Breezes  
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## **The Art of Pruning**

Yes, it oftentimes seems to me that it's an art – for which I'm not sure I have completely mastered....yet. Pruning appears so overwhelming at first. I am finding that we don't have to win the war (so to speak) today, just win one shrub battle at a time.

Stay with me, this is going to make sense.

Our home had seven (yes SEVEN!) shrubs when we moved there. Living with shrubs is new to me, so seven seemed incredibly overwhelming – like national-forest-size-overwhelming. After a year of completely avoiding the shrubs, I decided it was time to give pruning a try. I started with the burning bush (winged euonymus) to get my feet wet, and also because it was the smallest. Success!

This year's projects were the four viburnum shrubs and the firethorn shrub (Pyracantha). We'll just say these will be ongoing projects. Next spring, the forsythia will be top of my list. It is so overgrown that it doesn't hardly flower and how disappointing is that? So, let's help solve the problem with pruning!

Pruning is the application to remove parts of a plant in order to improve its shape without changing its natural form. It stimulates blooming and improves growth. Pruning at the proper time removes branches with minimal damage so that the wood heals properly in the shortest time possible.

Various types of shrubs require pruning at different times of the year. The simple rule is that shrubs blooming in the spring should be pruned immediately after their flowering. Shrubs blooming in the summer should be pruned in the fall (when dormant) or very early in the spring before growth starts. Do not prune any shrub during late summer.

Though light pruning and removal of dead wood are fine this time of year, more severe pruning should be left until spring. Consider pruning to be "light" if 10% or less of the plant is removed. Dead wood does not count in this calculation.

Keep in mind that even light pruning of spring-blooming shrubs such as lilac and forsythia will reduce flowers for next year.

Shrubs differ in how severely they can be cutback. Junipers do not break bud from within the plant and therefore should be trimmed lightly if you wish to keep the full shape. Overgrown junipers should be removed.

On the other hand, there are certain shrubs that can be pruned back severely during the spring. Rejuvenation is the most severe type of pruning and may be used on multi-stem shrubs that have

become too large with too many old branches to justify saving the younger canes. All stems are cut back to 3- to 5-inch stubs. This works well for spirea, forsythia, pyracantha, ninebark, Russian almond, little leaf mock orange, shrub roses, and flowering quince. Just remember that spring is the correct time to do this, not now.

Besides rejuvenation, there are two other types of pruning methods.

Heading back is useful for leggy shrubs as it stimulates the development of many smaller buds and shoots lower on the stem. Essentially, it results in denser growth. This process involves selective cutting of the terminal portion of a branch back to a bud. Heading back can also control the height of the plant.

Thinning is the least conspicuous of these pruning methods. You may have heard it called renewal pruning. For plants that are too dense, use the thinning method by cutting off twigs or side branches where attached to the main stem. For multi-stem shrubs, you may also remove older branches at ground level.

Further information on pruning shrubs is available by visiting the Extension Office (215 Kansas, Courthouse, Alma; [kamayer@ksu.edu](mailto:kamayer@ksu.edu); 765-3821). For Bluestem Breezes archives, check out [wabaunsee.ksu.edu](http://wabaunsee.ksu.edu).