



Two pruning mishaps in one small space butchered evergreen and neglected maple with dead top and multi stems sprouting below the graft.

gardens**oot**

ARTICLE AND PHOTOS  
BY DEREK THOMAS

Something very unattractive is taking over many DC North gardens. They jump out of the tranquil gardens like abstract, obtrusive, garden sculptures. What are these strange trees and shrubs, and how come they seem to be multiplying more quickly than the corner Starbucks of several years ago?

Sadly they aren't anything quite as intriguing as a sculpture fairy that has descended on DC to take over Edward Scissorhand's work. No, these badly butchered trees and shrubs are the work of well-meaning, uninformed weekend warriors. And in some cases, what has happened is far less forgivable; these poor mutilated plants are the result of someone who has been hired to prune the homeowner's garden and has done so with little or no idea of the art of pruning.

In the past few weeks, I have seen shrubs butchered to resemble strange nonsensical shapes; or worse, plants that should not be sheared have been cut to look something like a shrub. These poorly pruned plants will take months or years to recover, if ever. Many will suffer from disease and insect damage as they waste stored energy trying to right the wrong inflicted upon them by oftentimes well-meaning stewards.

#### **We Can Nip This in the Bud**

When deciding to prune your plants, take the time to learn the "how" and "why" of proper pruning. There is a wealth of resource books available that can help to make the task of pruning less random and more purposeful. In the meantime the following condensed primer will help you get a good start on the reasons we prune and hopefully inspire you to investigate the how and why behind proper plant pruning. If hiring someone to do the work for you, check their references and ask them to show you some examples of their work. As with anything in landscaping, and most home projects for that matter, oftentimes cutting costs by hiring untrained laborers could cost you exponentially more in the long run.

## **The How and Why of Pruning** Proper Pruning Improves Plant Health



## The Pruning Primer

One of the primary reasons for pruning is to make sure that plants are as healthy as possible. Proper pruning will address many potential plant problems and is essential to plant health. Removing weak and damaged limbs and reducing the risk of disease and infection are two of the accomplishments proper and timely pruning achieves. Pruning will also increase a plant's ornamental value and improve their natural appearance.

You have to understand the principals of a plants response to pruning in order to realize its full potential. Understanding how plants grow will aid you in understanding why we prune. Pruning should never be done without a good reason or without a clear purpose. You should have a clear idea of the intention of each pruning cut you make.

## Why Pruning Works

The most important thing to know about pruning is that when a part of a plant is removed, you are diverting hormones. Plants have growth regulating hormones that ensure that the tips continue to grow away from the roots – “apical dominance.” When you remove these young, green shoots, the plant will have to divert its growth hormone known as auxin to the next highest node – a node is usually located in the space where the leaf connects to the stem. Most plants will respond with new growth at the node closest to the cut you make. Some plants will respond to this type of pruning by producing multiple stems along nodes below the cut. Each plant has different requirements when pruning. Knowing the growing habits of your plants will help you to prune properly.

Pruning ensures vigorous new growth. And helps keep dead and decaying limbs from spreading disease and infection to younger healthier limbs.

## Controlling Plant Size

Heavy pruning can be used to control plant size. When pruning heavily, there is usually a flush of new growth that gives you the impression that the pruning has stimulated new growth. However, you have actually cut down the plants ability to produce food (photosynthesis), while forcing the plant to use up its stored food. Repeated heavy pruning without proper fertilizer will actually hurt the plant in the long term. And even in the best cases, you will alter the new growth not increase it.

## Formative Pruning

Selectively removing buds in young plants can produce a particular form or a desired shape. This type of pruning is perhaps the most obvious reason for pruning. For garden plants, this will also produce a pleasing appearance.

## When to Prune

When pruning, it is important to understand the habits of the plant you are about to prune. If you are thinking about pruning your Hydrangea back to the ground this spring, be prepared to have sparse, if any, blooms this year. You see Hydrangeas only bloom on last year's stems, and pruning them back to stubs in early spring will produce wonderful leaves and very few, if any, blooms. Always be careful when prun-

ing in early spring since this is the time that food reserves are moving rapidly back up from the roots to the stems. Cutting back harshly in early spring can severely hurt the plant. This problem can be avoided by pruning in late winter or once the plant has fully leafed out.

Winter pruning of deciduous trees also allows you to see the structure of the tree without the obstruction of its leaves. Winter pruning also helps prevent the entry of pathogens, since healing will be rapid in spring.

## How to Prune

Once you identify the proper time to prune your particular plant and the parts to remove, you must then perform the job in a way to insure rapid healing with minimal risk of infection. The cuts must be made cleanly with no crushing or fraying of twigs. This requires the use of reliable proper tools that are suitable for the pruning task at hand. This is where referring to a good pruning book will be particularly helpful. You should prune above a bud that is the right height for the desired outcome. Make sure that the uppermost bud is pointing in the direction that is desired. Make an upwardly sloping cut starting on the opposite side of the shoot to the bud. Cutting on an angle will ensure rainwater runs off. Refrain from using pruning seals since their benefits have not been proven.

## Tools

There are many products on the market to meet all of your pruning needs. Make sure that you purchase tools from a well-respected company as buying discount pruning tools will produce discounted results. When buying your pruning tools, make sure you buy a reputable brand, keep your tools sharpened and clean, and your plants will respond in a healthy manner.

## The Final Cut,

As with any overview, this article has hopefully inspired you to do more research in this area of gardening. Keep in mind that proper pruning is a must to plant health. Proper tools and knowledge of pruning techniques will take you far in this very important, often discounted area of plant maintenance.

## Resources

Trusted pruning companies: Fiskars, [www.fiskars.com](http://www.fiskars.com); Corona, [www.coronaclipper.com](http://www.coronaclipper.com).

Pruning guide: Corona clipper has a great downloadable version of

their pruning guide. Once on the home page, click on resources, then on the menu click on gardening advice and download the pruning guide document.

Pruning handbook: pruning and training, eyewitness series by DK \$19.

*Derek Thomas is a certified professional horticulturist and principal of Thomas Landscapes. His garden designs have been featured on HGTV's Curb Appeal. He can be reached at [www.thomaslandscapes.com](http://www.thomaslandscapes.com) or 301-642-5182. ★*



These badly hacked evergreens will never be attractive again.

Example of improperly pruned Crape Myrtle

