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## PRUNING SHRUBS TO SOLVE PROBLEMS

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Do you have a red-twig dogwood whose stems are grayer than red? How about a Forsythia that only blooms near branch ends? Maybe an old lilac with bare, twiggy stems on the bottom half? These are shrub issues to solve with correct pruning.

As a general rule, prune summer blooming shrubs and shrubs with nondescript blossoms while dormant, usually March into early April. Wait to prune spring blooming shrubs until just after they bloom, unless major renovation type pruning is being done.

Red-twig dogwood is often planted for its bright red twigs. If this shrub is not pruned on a regular basis, older stems develop gray bark as they age.

Once this shrub is established, regular pruning is needed to remove older stems. This makes room for new growth with the desired red color.

March is a good time to thin red-twig dogwoods and other shrubs. Without leaves, it is easier to see what needs to be removed. If needed, most shrubs can be pruned well into April as well as in June and July.

On red twig dogwood, remove stems with gray bark at the point where they attach to another stem or as close to the ground as possible. If the shrub is an older neglected plant, cut the entire shrub to the ground; or, over a 3-year period, remove one-third of the older stems each year.

Forsythia, like most blooming shrubs, flower best on younger wood. If regular and correct pruning is not done, blooming eventually occurs only on younger wood near branch tips.

Most shrub pruning is done to lower plant height and shearing type cuts are used. Repeated heading back or shearing of a shrub is what leads to reduced flowering, dead stems, and bare stems on the lower half of the plant.

While pruning to lower shrub height does result in new growth, avoid repeated heading back of shrubs without ever thinning them. Repeated shearing is the main cause of shrubs having bare stems near the base. The dense growth above shades out the bottom half.

The most important type of shrub pruning is thinning to remove older stems and dead wood. This prevents the shrub becoming so dense that it ends up being a shell of leaves surrounding a bare center or an umbrella of leaves atop bare stems.

If the height of a shrub needs to be controlled, it is best to use selective pruning rather than shearing. For selective pruning, identify the tallest branches on the shrub. In place of cutting all branches to the exact same height, remove the tallest branches at the point they attach to another branch or near the ground.

Along with reducing height, this thins out dense branching in shrubs. In place of an unnaturally sheared plant, the shrub retains a more natural and pleasing appearance.

Thinning Forsythia and other blooming shrubs also removes older wood on which flowers will no longer develop; making room for younger flowering wood. And thinning opens up a plant to sunlight, reducing dead stems within the plant and helping maintain foliage near the the bottom half of the plant.

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In the last week, I've had five people send photos of Spruce trees that have turned reddish-brown over the winter. Some spruce are browning near the bottom of the tree and others have turned completely brown. While spruce are affected by a number of disease and insect issues, given the time of year the browning is occurring, and how quickly dieback is occurring, the main factors are most likely a combination of environmental stresses of last June's heat and high winds, drought stress during summer and fall, winter desiccation, and possibly cold temperature injury from a period of sudden temperature drops last November. While it is wise to inspect trees for diseases or insects, it will be important to water evergreen trees this spring in the absence of rainfall, mulch trees, and avoid nitrogen fertilization. And if 50 % or more of an evergreen has turned brown, it is unlikely to recover and is best removed.

If pine twigs are littering the ground near a pine tree at this time of year, squirrels have likely been nipping the small twigs off during winter. They do this to feed on the tender buds, gain access to tender inner bark tissue, to access sap as a moisture source, and sometimes they're marking their territory. Squirrels nipping pine twigs off will not kill a healthy pine but may result in some distorted growth. This activity of squirrels nipping pines can be ignored. If you would like to reduce it, there are smell or taste repellants that could be sprayed on trees to deter squirrels, however, these products need to be reapplied as the label recommended to continue to be effective. Exclusion of squirrels is difficult but may be the best solution where feasible. Prevent squirrels from climbing isolated trees by encircling the trunk with a metal collar about six feet off the ground. Be sure the collar does not girdle the trunk over time.

It's the week of St. Patrick's Day and some people may be itching to plant potatoes; but there's plenty of time for potato planting, and waiting can avoid the risks of planting too early. The soil temperature at planting depth should be at least 45 degrees Fahrenheit, with little risk the soil temperature will drop any lower. Soil temperatures below 45 degrees prevent wound healing of cut potato seed pieces and delay plant emergence. The longer a seed piece sits in cold soil, the more likely it will decay before producing a healthy plant that will survive and produce a good crop. If you still wish to plant on or near St. Patrick's Day, you can reduce the risk of seed decay by planting whole seed or seed that has been cut and allowed to heal before planting. The intact skin of whole seed potatoes and the healed surface of suberized seed pieces are very resistant to seed decay and can increase your chances of establishing a good stand.

When we have warm spring days, it's tempting to go outside and do yard and garden work; but it's also wise to wait until weather is consistently warm to clean up landscape beds from winter. If you've already cleaned up perennial beds, be prepared to cover plants again when cold weather threatens. Winter mulch, the tops of plants and leaves that blow into landscape beds during fall often do one of their most important jobs in late winter. And that is keeping plants dormant as long as possible. The main purpose of winter mulch is protecting plants from extremes, and keeping plants dormant. Don't remove mulch too early, instead let mulch do its job of keeping plants dormant until the risk of very cold temperatures is past. Warm sunny weather causes plants to break dormancy early and they become more susceptible to cold temperatures. Rake leaves off of lawns, but keep mulch in place on ornamental plants for now.

March into April is a good time to prune shade trees and summer blooming shrubs. However, for roses and suffrutescent shrubs, it's best to wait until mid to late April to prune. Suffrutescent shrubs are shrubs that are not fully hardy to Nebraska and their tops are killed back each winter. Examples of suffrutescent shrubs are Caryopteris or blue mist spirea and Buddleia or butterfly bush. With these types of shrubs and roses, pruning often consists of removing winter killed wood. By waiting until mid to late April to prune, we have a better idea of how much wood actually needs to be removed. Research has also shown that pruning roses and suffrutescent shrubs too early, such as in mid to late winter, can increase the amount of winter injury to these plants. Leaving the tops well into April will also delay plants from breaking dormancy too early and becoming more susceptible to cold temperature injury from late spring freezes.