

Yard and Garden – 04-27-2013 - Ted Griess / Extension Horticulture Assistant

What can be done with an overgrown shrub? If the shrub is deciduous and not a conifer, there is hope. Rather than destroying it, consider rejuvenating it. Simple as that may sound, properly rejuvenating a shrub will take three years, involve a certain degree of skill, and require a lot of patience.

I define shrubs as low-growing, woody plants with several permanent stems rather than single trunks. Because of their low growing, bushy stature, the purpose of shrubs in the landscape varies. Sometimes they are grown in numbers, perhaps serving as a hedge. In that scenario, their purpose may serve as a screen or to help define a property line. Other times shrubs are grown individually. They can function as an accent or specimen plant. The numerous attributes of shrubs include shape, form, color, texture, and often ornamental flowers.

Although shrubs are considered low growing, selecting the wrong species for the wrong site often results in overgrown, unruly plants. Once a shrub becomes too large and unsightly, a decision must be made either to remove or rejuvenate it. Rejuvenating a shrub involves selective pruning—cutting back and/or thinning-out—ultimately reestablishing a purposeful and manageable shrub.

It is strongly advised never to remove more than one-third of a shrub in a particular season. Should one remove more than one-third a year, it greatly reduces the shrub's ability to produce enough photosynthesis to remain healthy and vigorous.

Some shrubs, such as red and yellow twig dogwood, are grown for their colorful red or yellow stems. With these two species, as the stems become older, they lose their brilliant colors, become thicker in size, and are covered with less attractive bark. With many flowering shrubs, as the stems become older, they weaken, produce fewer flowers, and often harbor borer insects. Two examples of these include lilac and privet. In each of these situations, thinning by removing the older stems (canes) is recommended. A lopping shears or tree saw works best. Thinning out the older canes stimulates the development of new canes.

In the first year, cut out and remove only one third of the largest and oldest canes as close to the soil line as possible. The following year, remove another third, and in the third year, remove the balance of the older canes. After three years, the entire shrub will consist of newer canes with none being older than three years.

When a shrub becomes too tall, only remove one third of its height in a given year. Eventually, by following this procedure, in a few years one can pull the shrub back to a manageable height. Once a shrub has been rejuvenated, a light, annual pruning is all that is needed to keep it controlled.

Although one can certainly prune deciduous shrubs any time of the year, it is best to prune shrubs when they are dormant and not actively growing. With the absence of leaves, the structure of the shrub is easier to ascertain. If one prunes early spring-flowering shrubs, such as lilac or forsythia, when they are dormant, blossoms for that year will be sacrificed. These types of shrubs produce their flowers on the previous season's growth; thus, they are best pruned immediately after they bloom.

There is hope when rejuvenating deciduous shrubs but not conifers (evergreens). Most evergreens lack the ability to regenerate new canes if the older ones are cut back to the soil or if cut back to where little or no green exists. One should always select the correct size of conifer shrub for where it is to be planted; otherwise, it generally outgrows its site. Once a conifer shrub becomes too large for its space, it must be removed—not rejuvenated.