

Pruning is important to the health of the tree, and can even affect how long the tree will live. It affects the shape of the tree, how big it is, and whether or not the plant in question could be problematic in the future. We prune to help with the aesthetic of the plant, as well as to prevent the spread of disease, or to ensure the safety of others.

When you are pruning, timing is everything. If ornamental plants are pruned at the wrong time, you could drastically reduce the number of flowers that will appear on your plant for the year. For a spring blooming shrub, such as a lilac bush, they bloom on the previous year's growth. If pruned during late fall or winter, you would be cutting off the flower buds that have already begun to form on the branches. Spring blooming plants are best pruned right after they flower. Ornamentals that bloom later in the year are best pruned in March before the new growth starts. Avoid pruning in late summer because this could cause new growth to form, but won't allow the new growth enough time to harden off before the first frost. Deciduous trees should also be pruned in March before the new growth begins. If possible, evergreen trees should not be pruned, because if they are pruned incorrectly it can lead to bare spots in the appearance of the tree that won't grow back. If there are ever dead or diseased branches, these can be pruned immediately, because they will become brittle over time and can pose a hazard.

Before you can prune your landscape, however, you need to ensure that you have the proper tools. A set of hand pruners, and a longer set of loppers are a great place to start. These should both be sharp and clean. Using a ten percent bleach solution will sufficiently sanitize your tools. If you have to twist, or take several tries to get through the branch, you may need a larger tool, such as a chainsaw. Remember, if you have to stand on a ladder to prune a branch, it should be done by a professional.

If you are considering pruning, there are a few things to look for, especially in trees. I already discussed removing dead and diseased branches, so these are general pruning suggestions. The easiest to see are water sprouts and suckers. Suckers are the offshoots that come from the base of the tree or the roots, and water sprouts are the shoots that emerge from the branches. They are relatively easy to differentiate from an actual branch because they will be completely vertical, whereas branches will be horizontal or at an angle out from the tree. These should be gotten rid of because they take energy that could be used in other parts of the tree, and can interfere with the shape of the tree. If there are branches that are rubbing, one of them should be removed to prevent repeat wounds to the tree or plant. Another main thing to look for is branches that are pointed in toward the trunk of the tree. These may not be an issue now, but could be in the future. Pruning is all about looking for potential problems, and taking care of them before they become problems.

Pruning can help to ensure the health and shape of the tree for years to come. Spring flowering woody plants should be pruned after they bloom to avoid cutting off potential flower buds. Most other plants should be pruned in March, before the growing season begins. Tools should be clean and sharp, to prevent damage and spread of disease. Suckers, water sprouts, rubbing branches, and inward pointing branches should all be removed. If you have any questions or would like to suggest a topic for me to write about, feel free to contact me at the Buffalo County Extension Office, at 308-236-1235, or mearnest2@unl.edu.