



## Fall Pruning

Now is a good time to start thinking about fall clean-up in your garden. I get a lot of questions about pruning, or ‘cutting back’ plant material around this time, and wanted to give a few pointers for doing it.

- 1. Why?** Pruning woody plant material can help maintain a plant’s overall shape and form. Often times a stray branch might out-grow the rest of the shrub, or a few are broken in a storm. These branches aren’t necessary to the survival of the tree, and certainly detract from the overall aesthetics of the plant.

When cutting back herbaceous plants (those that die to the ground every year like daylilies), not only does it help with the appearance of the plant, but it can have a great effect on the health of the plant the following year. Peonies, for example, are really prone to botrytis blight, a type of fungus that can overwinter in leaf litter left on the ground around the plant. Many insects also do this, and then are seen in full force the following year.

- 2. What?** Any herbaceous plants can be cut down in the fall. If you have a type of plant with winter interest, or seeds that persist through the winter, leave it! These can add dimension and interest when there’s not a whole lot going on in the garden otherwise. Seeds can also provide food for birds and other wildlife you want visiting your garden.

Woody plant material can be a little trickier. Some plants that aren’t so winter hardy, like tea roses, should be pruned next spring. By leaving those extra branches, you give the plant just a little more winter insulation than it would have otherwise. If you have other shrubs that flower, keep in mind that many woody plants flower on old wood. For example: Immediately after lilacs bloom in the spring, they begin developing the buds for the next year. If you prune them in late fall, you won’t have any flowers the following year. And what good is a lilac without flowers?! A good rule of thumb is if a shrub flowers in the spring, prune it after it flowers. If it flowers in the summer, or into the fall, prune it in the early spring, before it has developed new buds. It can be confusing!

- 3. When?** Herbaceous material can be cut down anytime around mid-October to whenever you get done! Woody plant material that is dead can be cut any time through the year. However, if you are cutting back, or pruning branches that are still alive, it is best if you wait until the plant is dormant, so late fall, winter, or early spring. If you cut live branches when the plant is still active in the fall, new cuts can encourage it to produce new growth. These new shoots are tender, and not ready for winter. They can be the first ones to die when winter hits.
- 4. How?** Most herbaceous material can be cut to the ground, unless like I mentioned earlier, it has something you would like to keep for winter interest. Woody branches can be cut usually 3-4” above ground if you are removing the branch altogether, or if you are just re-shaping the shrub, cut it back a few inches, step back, see what it looks like, and then prune again if you so desire.

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