

Fall Pruning

Recently I have had a lot of questions regarding when to prune plants back for the winter and which plants to prune back in the fall. I thought this was a good topic for my news article because there are a lot of misconceptions about when to prune plants back. Pruning your plants back too soon can cause them to not flower and it can also kill the plant if the crown gets injured by the freezing temperatures in the winter.

Many people wonder when the best time to cut back peonies and iris for the winter. A common problem that people have with iris, in particular, is that they start to look ugly and boring later in the summer. It is at this time that everyone needs to fight their urges to cut it back and wait until later in the fall to cut them back. After the first couple of hard frosts you can cut all herbaceous perennials back to the ground or as close to it as you can get. Herbaceous perennials include peonies, iris, daylilies, Asiatic and oriental lilies, hibiscus, hydrangea, and anything else with a fleshy green stem. Cutting these plants back too early can cause them to flower less or not at all, or they may even die. You may want to cover the crowns of these plants with a layer of mulch to protect them from the harsh winter conditions we so often see in Nebraska. If for some reason you can't get out to cut them back in the fall it can be done in the early spring. It is much easier to clean them up in the fall though, because after they start growing out again in the spring, you have to be more careful with your pruning cuts.

As for pruning your trees and shrubs, you really want to wait until later in the fall after the plants have gone dormant. Now that the weather has cooled down, people think that they are able to go out and prune whatever they want. If you prune your plants too soon in the fall they can start to grow again and winter dieback could occur on those branches where you pruned. You could get away with pruning trees and shrubs in the late fall, such as in November, but just remember it needs to be after the plant is completely dormant. As for pruning of fruit trees, this should be held off until March, just before they begin their new growth next spring.

For good pruning practices, with the perennials just cutting them to ground level with a set of good pruners will have the best effect. With trees and shrubs, hand pruners or loppers are great for the smaller branches. For the larger branches you should use a saw with the three step technique to use to ensure that you do not tear the bark, causing more injury to the tree. The first step is to cut the branch from the underside of the branch upward, about six inches out from the collar, or where the branch attaches to the trunk. Next, you go out a few inches away from the last cut and cut the branch off the tree. Finally, you should make one more cut right up against the collar of the branch to cut the stub off of the tree.

Thank you to Larry Germer for his useful input with this article

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