

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 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 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 appearance.

Thinning Forsythia and other blooming shrubs will also remove older wood on which flowers 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 bottom half of the plant.

These tips apply to almost all shrubs, not only dogwood and Forsythia. Heading back or shearing type cuts to reduce height are fine, but don't overlook thinning cuts to avoid a dense, overgrown shrub.