

Pruning:

When is the best time to prune shrubs?

Timing depends on the reason for pruning. If major renovation is needed, prune when the shrub is dormant. February and March are good times to do renovation pruning where more than 50% of the shrub will be removed. If you are pruning for general shaping and thinning, the time to prune depends on when the shrub blooms.

- Prune spring blooming shrubs after they bloom. They produce flower buds the previous year and flowering will be reduced if they are pruned prior to blooming.
- Prune summer blooming shrubs when they are dormant.
- Prune Mugho pine in June after new growth has begun.
- Prune Juniper, Arborvitae, and Japanese Yews from late winter into early spring.

Is it okay to cut a shrub all the way to the ground?

The general rule is if a shrub grows multiple stems from the ground up, pruning it close to the ground is okay. If the shrub grows from a single trunk at ground level and then branches into multiple stems, do not prune it close to the ground. Be aware that pruning forsythia and Gro Low Sumac to the ground can cause these shrubs to become quite large and unwieldy.

What causes shrubs to be bare of leaves near the bottom half?

Leggy shrubs with bare lower stems are usually the result of incorrect pruning. If the height of the shrub is lowered each year or the outer branches are sheared back each year, but stems are never thinned out; the shrub will eventually become so dense on the top or outer edges that lower leaves will be shaded and lower stems will soon be bare.

When pruning shrubs, be sure to thin the shrub along with lowering its height. To thin, remove about one-third of the largest diameter stems close to ground level to allow sunlight into the shrub.

What can be done to an old, overgrown shrub that has never been pruned?

One method for renovating overgrown shrubs is the one-third method. When the plant is dormant, remove one-third to one-half of the shrubs height and thin out one-third of the largest diameter stems close to ground level. During the second year, remove another one third of the largest diameter stems. Finally, during the third year, remove the last one-third of the oldest stems. From then on, take time each year to thin out the shrub as needed. The easiest method to renovate an overgrown shrub is to cut all of it to within 4 to 6 inches of the ground.

Shrub Selection

What shrub can I plant that will grow 3' tall, 3' wide and bloom a lot?

With the large selection of shrubs available, homeowners can usually find what they're looking for in a shrub; but keep in mind the best shrubs are those adapted to the growing conditions of the landscape site. Also, shrubs often grow larger than advertised and some pruning may be needed to maintain the size needed. Finally, while some shrubs, like Potentilla and some types of spirea, bloom on and off during the summer, most shrubs bloom for about two weeks. Ask at local garden centers or Extension offices for suggestions on shrubs for the landscape.

Planting Shrubs

When is the best time to plant shrubs?

Bare-root shrubs should be planted in early spring before bud break. Balled and burlapped and container grown shrubs can be planted almost anytime, but spring or fall planting is best.

How deep should shrubs be planted?

Bare root plants should be placed so the first root below the trunk or multiple stems is just below the soil line. Plant container grown shrubs at about the same depth they are in the container. Do not plant too deep. In clay or poorly drained soils, planting one to two inches above the soil line can be beneficial.

How big of a hole should be dug when planting shrubs?

The wider the better, but do not dig too deep. The majority of shrub roots grow out from the shrub, not down. Dig the hole two to three times wider than the root ball to loosen the soil and encourage root growth. If the soil is disturbed beneath the root ball, the shrub may settle after planting, resulting in too deep of planting.

Do all containers need to be removed when planting a shrub?

Yes. All containers, even biodegradable ones, need to be removed to encourage root growth out into surrounding soil.

Should a starter fertilizer be used at planting time?

Starter fertilizers contain phosphorous which is important for root growth. Most Nebraska soils have adequate levels of phosphorous and the use of a starter fertilizer is usually not necessary. A starter fertilizer may be beneficial when planting into cold, somewhat wet soils. A soil test is the best way to determine the need for phosphorous and other nutrients.

Should shrubs be fertilized with nitrogen at planting time?

Generally, no. If shrubs are planted in sandy or heavy clay soils, some nitrogen may be needed. Too much nitrogen at planting time can result in vegetative or leafy growth at the expense of roots. Also, most shrubs growing on the edge of a lawn receive adequate nutrients from lawn fertilization.

How much compost should be added to backfill soil placed in the planting hole?

None, unless you plan to amend the entire root zone of the mature shrub. Compost is an excellent amendment to increase soil organic matter; however, a large planting area should be amended and not just the soil placed in the planting hole; especially in heavier clay soils. This can lead to a perched water table and encircling roots within the planting hole that restrict root growth.

Watering Shrubs:

How often and how much should a shrub be watered?

Shrubs need about one inch of water per week. Supplemental watering is most critical during the first year a shrub is planted when roots are establishing. How often and how much water to apply depends on the type of shrub, soil type, the site's growing conditions, and climate. Sandier soils will require more frequent irrigation than heavier, clay soils. Water enough to moisten, not saturate, the soil 10 to 12 inches deep; allow the upper 4 to 5 inches of soil to dry moderately; then water again. On newly planted shrubs, be sure to moisten the soil outside of the original root ball to encourage outward root growth.

Can shrubs be overwatered?

Yes. Roots need water and oxygen to grow. As water is applied, it displaces oxygen in soil pore spaces. Low soil oxygen will slow or stop root growth. If a shrub is overwatered and soils remain saturated for long periods; or the shrub is growing in a compacted or poorly drained soil, low oxygen levels can kill a shrub.

Fertilizing Shrubs:

When is the best time to fertilize a shrub?

If a shrub needs fertilizer, the best time to fertilize is early spring just prior to spring green up or late fall. Late fall fertilization should be done after the first hard freeze up until the soil freezes. Winter dormancy may be delayed and winter injury increased if shrubs are fertilized between late July and the first freeze.

How much should shrubs be fertilized?

Most soils in Nebraska have adequate nutrient levels for shrubs. In many cases, no fertilization is needed. Shrubs growing on the edge of fertilized lawns rarely need additional fertilizer. If a shrub needs fertilizer, apply a slow release nitrogen product, such as milorganite, sulfur-coated urea or urea formaldehyde once a year. Avoid fast release nitrogen sources, such as ammonium nitrate, ammonium sulfate and urea.

Mulching

Should shrubs be mulched?

Mulch conserves soil moisture, maintains cooler soil temperatures, and suppresses weeds. Root growth is denser beneath a mulch layer than beneath turfgrass and young shrubs establish roots quicker when mulched. Ideally, shrubs should be grown in mulched beds.

What type and how much mulch should be used?

Use coarse organic mulch such as shredded bark or wood chips. Place the mulch two to four inches deep in a four foot diameter ring around the shrub. Keep the mulch six inches to one foot away from the stems to avoid moisture build-up against stems and rodent damage during winter.

Can mulch be harmful?

Mulch can be harmful if it is applied too deep or mounded against plant stems. Deep mulch reduces oxygen levels in soil, causing roots to grow into the mulch where they are susceptible to drying and temperature extremes. Deep mulch may invite gnawing rodents like voles. Mulch mounded against plant stems provides a moist environment for crown rot or infection by other pathogens.

Can you spread diseases with mulch?

The only disease known to spread in mulch is verticillium wilt. If a woody plant dies from verticillium wilt, do not chip the wood to use as mulch. However, the advantages of using mulch outweigh the risks of disease infection.

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