



Time for Early Spring Pruning

What's a gardener to do when it's too early to dig?

Pruning is a word that strikes fear in the heart of many. While there may be a few instances when pruning is best left to the professionals, a little spring pruning is something we can all manage.

The benefits of pruning are abundant. Removing dead or damaged sections of a vine or shrub lowers the risk of future disease and pest problems. Well-pruned plants grow and bloom with more vigor. And they look better.

When shrubs are without their leaves, it's easy to see their structure. The old adage: *measure twice, cut once* applies to pruning just as it does to cutting a piece of lumber. You can always prune more off, but once a cut is made, it's cut.

Don't let the fear of a misplaced cut stop you from picking up your pruning shears. Just as a bad hair cut resolves itself with time, a plant will generally grow out of a pruning mistake.

There are many plants that respond well to early spring pruning. So if we can't dig, let's prune!

Clematis



Early spring is a good time to prune some varieties of clematis. Their swelling buds will guide you where to make appropriate cuts.

First, determine the type of clematis you have. If you're like me and save every tag of every plant you've ever purchased, it's easy – just check the tag for its pruning type. If you don't have the tag, but remember its name, call your favorite garden center. If you don't know its name, your last clue to successful pruning is remembering when it bloomed last year.

Clematis are divided into three groups. Early bloomers (Type A or Pruning Group 1) bloom on old wood. If these are cut back now, you'll prune off this year's flowers. Wait to prune this group until June – just after they've finished flowering.

Some clematis produce two flushes of bloom. Plants in this category (Type B or Pruning Group 2) form buds on both old and new wood. Start now by pruning out dead or weak stems and any stems that bear few swelling buds. After you've enjoyed the first flush of old-growth blooms, do a second stage of pruning to encourage an exuberant late-season

display of flowers. This task involves removing the spent blooms of the first flush of flowers.

If you are a person who loves pruning, you will love clematis in the third group (Type C or Pruning Group 3). Vines in this group only bloom on new wood. They tend to be vigorous growers so you can cut these vines all the way back to the first pair of swelling buds. These are usually found about a foot or so above the ground.

Ornamental Grasses

Early spring is also the time to cut back those ornamental grasses you left standing last fall to provide winter interest in your landscape. Prune away old stems before new shoots begin to emerge.

Small grass specimens can be pruned using hand shears. For large clumps, you may need to resort to hedge clippers or, in extreme cases, a saw.

Begin at the outer edge of the clump and cut old growth to within a couple of inches of the ground. One of the best tricks I've learned is to tie the clump together first before beginning to prune. It is much easier to pick up one large bundle of grass than all those individual blades.

Cutting back evergreen or semi-evergreen grasses – like many of the sedges – all the way to the ground may damage the plants. Instead of using pruners, gently pull dead blades from each clump with your hand.

Roses



Roses are among the easiest woody plants to prune. Their thorns are easily managed if you wear a pair of long, leather gloves.

First, remove dead stems to ensure the overall health of the plant. Dead stems are usually discolored and bear no buds.

Today's shrub roses usually require just a light tip pruning to remove the dead portion at the top of each cane.

Then thin roses by removing a few of the oldest canes. Thinning gives roses an effective way to discourage powdery mildew on susceptible plants.

Hybrid tea roses should be pruned aggressively for the best flower production. First, remove dead, damaged or spindly canes. Cut other canes back to about a foot – try to make the cut just above an outward facing bud to direct the plant's growth.

The strong, long canes of climbing roses should be preserved to define the structure of the rose, but you should still remove any dead stems and tips.

Can't dig – who cares? Treat yourself to a new pair of gloves, grab your pruners, and get into the garden!



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