

# Garden practice Pruning shrubs

Prune shrubs regularly at the best time of year for flowering, reshaping plants to fit the space with a few well-placed cuts

Author: **Holly Farrell**, a freelance garden writer who trained at RHS Garden Wisley. Photography: **Tim Sandall**

*Of all routine* garden tasks, pruning shrubs is perhaps the one that causes most confusion and lack of confidence. However, by following some basic rules, every gardener can achieve good-shaped, floriferous, healthy shrubs.

Correct pruning will create a plant with a good branch structure and an even coverage of foliage, and will help promote better flowering. Regular pruning can keep shrubs to an appropriate size for the garden, and they benefit from an annual removal of dead, diseased or damaged growth. It is important to prune shrubs at the right time of year to make sure that flowers are not lost or growth hampered, and to avoid infection by certain diseases such as silver leaf on *Prunus*.

Always use sharp, clean tools of the appropriate size for the branch being cut: secateurs, loppers or a saw. Cut back to a bud or side branch for a more aesthetic finish as this will retain the natural growth habit of the shrub. Leaving no stumps to die back above a bud helps avoid infection.

Feed and water shrubs after pruning to minimise plant stress. Apply a base dressing of a controlled-release fertiliser to moist soil and then a topdressing of mulch if possible (taking care to avoid contact between the mulch and the base of the stem). Wound paints are no longer used as they have no discernible benefit and may harm the plant – which can quickly heal a clean cut unaided.

## Restoration pruning

You can rejuvenate shrubs that have become congested and overgrown by staging the pruning over several years. To renovate more robust shrubs, prune back to almost ground level or to little more than a trunk. Although no buds may be apparent on the main stem, their dormancy will be broken by the pruning, and the trunk will soon be covered in new shoots. This practice is not without risk if frost or drought follows but, with subsequent annual routine pruning, shrubs can be restored to a good shape. ●

**More from RHS Online** For more, search 'Pruning shrubs' at [www.rhs.org.uk](http://www.rhs.org.uk)

- ✦ Pruning *Prunus*: search 'Silver leaf' for affected plants and when to prune them.
- ✦ For pruning events in March, see p92 and p99

## Timing: when to prune



### Also applicable to:

- ✦ *Caryopteris*
- ✦ *Fuchsia magellanica* (hardy)
- ✦ *Hibiscus*
- ✦ *Hydrangea paniculata*
- ✦ *Indigofera heterantha*
- ✦ *Leycesteria formosa*
- ✦ *Perovskia atriplicifolia*
- ✦ *Spirea japonica*



Cut back *Buddleja davidii* to a balanced framework of branches.

## Pruning before flowering

Deciduous plants that flower any time from July into autumn, such as *Buddleja davidii*, do so on growth that has been produced that season. To promote vigorous-flowering stem growth, prune in spring as the buds produce new rosettes of leaves. Cut back the previous year's growth to two to three buds over a strong, open framework of healthy branches. Remove any crossing stems and cut back spindly stems or old, poor-flowering branches to the framework. With smaller shrubs that show less vigorous regrowth, adjust the height of the framework and consider removing less stem growth.

## To renew, cut back hard



RHS/BOB MARTIN

**Matthew Pottage**, Garden Manager Hardy Ornamental, RHS Garden Wisley, explains how large shrubs can be cut back dramatically to renew growth

We undertake regenerative pruning when shrubs outgrow their space and the flowers are above our heads. Prune to the main upright stems in mid-March to mid-April so the foliage has a whole season to ripen before winter; we always apply a granular balanced fertiliser or mulch around the base to compensate for lost growth. Healthy plants are more likely to respond well to this treatment.

### Also applicable to:

- ✦ *Cornus* or *Salix* (for winter stem colour)
- ✦ *Prunus lusitanica*, *P. laurocerasus*
- ✦ *Syringa vulgaris*



A mature camellia after cutting back.



Trace along a previously flowered stem to a suitable upright shoot.

## Pruning after flowering

Spring-flowering deciduous shrubs and those that start into bloom before the end of June, such as *Wiegela*, flower on growth produced the previous season. They should be pruned immediately after flowering to allow them time to grow and ripen stems that will flower the following year. Prune flowered stems back to a strong, upright shoot and shorten other stems in the same way to create a good shape. To open up the centre of the plant, take out one or two older stems to the base each year as well.



Prune *Wiegela florida* just as flowering ends.

### Also applicable to:

- ✦ *Ceanothus* (spring flowering)
- ✦ *Cytisus scoparius*
- ✦ *Deutzia*
- ✦ *Forsythia*
- ✦ *Kerria*
- ✦ *Philadelphus*
- ✦ *Ribes sanguineum*
- ✦ *Spirea thunbergii*



## Different pruning methods

*Choisya* pruned in June, after flowering.



Prune stems to within the overall shape to hide the cut.

### Reducing the size of evergreens

Many evergreens just require an annual trim – in summer or timed to follow flowering if this is significant – but neglected plants can be brought back under control by a two-stage process. In mid-spring, lightly prune the whole shrub, taking off a small length of stem from each tip. This will remove the apical dominance and stimulate buds to break lower down the stem. Then, in midsummer, prune back harder to the desired size and shape, cutting to a bud where possible and, if not, cutting to within the overall shape to hide the cut. This method is less severe than pruning back hard in one stage.

#### Also applicable to:

- ❖ *Elaeagnus*
- ❖ *Osmanthus*
- ❖ *Escallonia*
- ❖ *Pittosporum*
- ❖ *Hebe*
- ❖ *Skimmia*
- ❖ *Olearia*
- ❖ *Viburnum tinus*

### Removing one in three

Pruning out a proportion of old stems each year is appropriate for shrubs that regularly produce new shoots from the base and quickly become congested. Overgrown or congested shrubs that do not respond well to hard pruning can also be renovated over several years by gradual rejuvenation. In the early spring of the first year take out a third of all old stems close to the base and reduce all other stems in length by a third.

The following year take out half of the old stems and prune back the year's growth as appropriate for its flowering period. In the third year remove all the remaining old stems and continue pruning to shape.

#### Also applicable to:

- ❖ *Abelia*
- ❖ *Philadelphus*
- ❖ *Corylus avellana*
- ❖ *Ribes sanguineum*
- ❖ *Garrya elliptica*
- ❖ *Rosa* (many shrub roses)
- ❖ *Hamamelis*
- ❖ *Viburnum*
- ❖ *Magnolia*
- ❖ *x bodnantense*
- ❖ *Mahonia x media*



Hybrid musk rose 'Felicia' pruned in early spring to remove a third of old stems and open up the centre.



Before



After

### Raising the canopy

For shrubs that have become too large for the border (here *Philadelphus*), consider raising the canopy to allow the plants below to have more light and space. Raising the canopy also creates airy screens and transforms amorphous shrubs into interesting features. Remove shorter stems, thin spindly growth and the lower sideshoots of the main stems to reveal the lower section of bare branches. Thin out the older stems as appropriate (taking out no more than a third) to create an aesthetically pleasing framework.

#### Also applicable to:

- ❖ *Acer palmatum*
- ❖ *Amelanchier lamarckii*
- ❖ *Berberis*
- ❖ *Camellia*
- ❖ *Cotoneaster*
- ❖ *Magnolia*
- ❖ *Rhododendron*
- ❖ *Sambucus*