



*Iris germanica* from  
Pierre-Joseph Redouté's *Les  
Liliacées* (1802-1816) held  
by the RHS Lindley Library.

# Skewing your prunes

Garden writer and regular *The Garden* columnist Nigel Colborn on misunderstood pruning

**A**s soon as this month's big flower show ends, zealous gardeners will be dashing home to sharpen their tools for the Chelsea Chop.

Before they've unfurled so much as a petal, phloxes, echinaceas, tall sedums and so on will be hacked down in their prime, like rainforest trees in the path of loggers.

Such brutality makes sense because cutting back juggles flowering times. Colour is filched from summer's floral excess but returns to pep up the later, greener months. Regrown stems will be stocky enough not to need supports, and each should carry more, if individually smaller, flowers.

But the chop is a caustic process and I confess to an uneasiness about it. Pruning, whatever its purpose, is a means of perverting plants from their natural inclinations. Sometimes, that is essential: espalier apples must be shaped and Hybrid Tea roses won't perform unless regularly pruned. But are we too 'hands on' sometimes? Is there not a danger, among

susceptible gardeners, of developing an unhealthy addiction to secateurs?

Of all tasks, pruning appears the most ineptly handled. Millions of gardeners, even experienced ones, haven't a clue how to prune. The awful results are evident in front gardens, and even in public parks where staff should know better. Shrubs are frequently clipped into bobbles or big guardsmen's bearskins. Stems of climbing roses, trained vertically, fail to produce flowering laterals. Owners of unruly bamboos slash in despair, rather than following Christopher Lloyd's approach of thinning out stems, enabling one to see into and through the plant to the views beyond.

As for trees – almost everyone underestimates how big they will grow. Pruning to reduce size, while retaining the tree's inherent beauty and shape, is never easy. Better by far, nine times out of ten, is to remove the mistake and plant another tree more suited to the space.

Expert advice would put us right, you might think, but I have doubts about that, too. Instructions are so prescriptive and non-negotiable. Received wisdom on wisteria, for example, is to prune new growths to seven buds, each August. That seems sound and corresponds with summer pruning of apples, to promote blossom. But why the second cut, in January, to two buds? For 27 years, in our previous garden, wisterias bloomed outrageously on just a single August cut.

Even the manner of

cutting is prescribed. Stems must be snipped at an angle. If severed horizontally, water might lie on the cut surface, thereby inducing rots. But for water to stand, you need a level surface. And you couldn't achieve that if you tried, especially up a ladder, in a gale, with your loppers at arms' length.

*'Is there not a danger, among susceptible gardeners, of developing an unhealthy addiction to secateurs?'*

Hedges, too, are the pedant's delight. We are urged to cut yew in August – but why, if midwinter is more convenient? I can find no evidence that winter cutting harms yew, indeed, it is recommended for such equally hardy evergreens as holly.

Why should hedges be wider at the bottom than the top, as instructed in how-to literature, when

they do just as well with vertical sides? And who first decreed that laurel must be cut with secateurs, and never with shears or a mechanical hedge trimmer? Admittedly, sheared laurel leaves look horrid for a few weeks, but can you imagine clipping 100 metres of hedge – top and sides – with a pair of secateurs?

As with all gardening techniques, pruning should be flexible. We should adapt it to suit the individual conditions that apply where each plant is grown. And among us ordinary gardeners, deeper practical knowledge is needed, as well as horticultural skill. This, though, should be coupled with more emphasis on the artistic aspects of pruning, and less on the 'hack like mad' approach.

The Japanese do this brilliantly, contriving exquisitely natural shapes with the most unnatural methods. Without going 'Eastern' we, too, could develop a mind-set that regards secateurs as tools for enhancing beauty or productivity, but never as a means of hacking plants to size or, worse, for snipping ineffectually at shrubs in an attempt to make them look tidy. ●



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