

Spring Landscape Maintenance

Spring is the time of year when I do about 95% of my landscape maintenance. It's not by choice. I'd spread it over the year if I could, it's just that spring is the best time for the plants. I've enjoyed the seed heads over the winter; have left the dry stalks standing so the base and roots are protected, and retained my lavender wands on the plant to help keep snow from sitting on the foliage. But it's spring and I have to think about what needs to be done and in what order to do it.

Pruning sends a signal to the plant that it needs to put out new stems or branches to replace what's been cut. Most books will tell you to prune when the plant is dormant, however, plants are never really dormant. They either feed their leaves or make new roots. The dormant season turns out to be the root growing season. So my theory on pruning is to wait until you see something green growing on the plant. This is especially important for less hardy plants like cherry sage. In essence I'm letting the plant tell me when it's ready. A side benefit of this method is that if the plant is dead I haven't wasted time or money pruning the plant. And some plants are really, really late to leaf out – waiting means you don't dig it up because you think it's dead. My "the plant is dead" date is June 1.

How/what do you prune? First you should never start pruning without knowing what you're trying to do. If that's prune for shape, think again. Here's the order for how I prune:

1. **Dead wood** - you can prune dead wood off at any time. Dead wood can be identified by cutting through the bark and if there's a brown ring inside, you have a dead branch.
2. **Suckers** - some plants tend to create suckers away from the base, e.g. Russian sage or New Mexico Olive. I cut the sucker below the ground which tends to slow their regrowth.
3. **Exterior hazard branches** - these are branches that get in people's way, hanging over the sidewalk or street, or growing into the house or wall. I cut these back to a node, joint, or stem.
4. **Crossing branches** - if branches will cross or rub, I cut one of them back to the next node, joint, or even back to a main stem. The theory behind crossing branches is that by rubbing they'll create an opening that bugs or diseases can enter. I usually focus on interior branches and let the exterior ones grow. This opens up the center of a plant to the sun. In New Mexico that may be a problem if the plant gets too much sun after pruning.
5. **For shape or form**. I try to limit this type of pruning because this takes artistic talent and the tendency is to cut too much. So by making this the last pruning I do on a plant I hope to limit the damage I do by pruning. After you've pruned for form the plant should look like it does in nature not a box or a ball.

Types of pruning

There are several ways to prune. These are the ways I recommend.

1. **Renewal** - cut the oldest fattest stems, at the base, never more than 1/3 of plant per year so it takes 3 years to complete. This method is used to renew the plant by removing the oldest growth each year. This method works well with butterfly bushes.
2. **Heading** - cut an upper branch back to a node or joint (never cut off more than 1/3 of branch). Heading cuts are used to make plants look shorter.

3. Thinning - trim out small stems at the base or reduce interior branching. Thinning is used for plants that get crowded in center, like bridal wreath spirea or forsythia.

To force growth in a particular direction you can slant cut above a bud that's going the way you want the branch to go usually away from the center of the plant. This method is often used with roses.

Pruning Don'ts

Never prune off more than 1/3 of the plant. If heading, never prune more than 1/3 of a branch. Spend the least amount of time pruning for shape. Don't shear most plants or top trees. The growth from the cut point is weaker and looks unnatural. There are a few plants that accept shearing because it approximates animal browsing. Two of these are: winterfat and potentilla.

Trees and shrubs

Pruning applies most often to trees and shrubs, plants with woody stems. Trees should be trained to one trunk unless they're naturally a multi-trunked tree. If you have no leader trunk (primary trunk) through the tree, you'll need to select a leader and head back or cut off the competing branches. You may need to do this over several years since cutting more than 1/3 of the tree in one season is not recommended. Conifers need little to no pruning.

Renewal pruning is often used for shrubs. For apache plume I do nothing. If I haven't overwatered it, it grows very nicely. When I do occasionally have to prune it, I use renewal pruning. Golden currant gets renewal pruning, typically before it blooms although that means I lose the blooms from the cut part. It always grows more than I expect so I don't prune it enough. For winterfat and potentilla I shear off the dead or brown foliage. For Bush penstemon I cut all the stalks off, level to the ground. It's similar to a grass. For cherry sage and blue mist spirea I tend to prune out the branches on the inside of the shrub and cut off last year's seed heads at a node. Both are late to put out foliage. For Grosso lavender I shear the wands off even with the foliage. For nandina (if I had any) I'd cut the tallest stems at ground level. Some English varieties of lavender have gray/dead foliage after winter as does Powis Castle artemesia. I shear off the dead foliage on these. I've read you're supposed to prune the artemesia hard, but I killed mine the first time I tried this so now I just trim it some. With fernbush I trim off the seed heads and any exterior hazard branches.

Lady Banks rose should be pruned right after blooming, leaving about 10 buds on a lateral branch. This one's hard for me because I never remember to do it then!

My favorite shrubs are those that need little or no pruning like rosemary, mahonias, or big sage artemesia.

Perennials

Perennials usually get their dead foliage trimmed off. For Valerian or my torch goldenrod I cut the dead stalks at ground level. For Russian sage I usually cut the stalks about 8" above the ground. Many plants have basal foliage and that's the first green you see. I cut the dead stalks or foliage level with the ground once I see the basal foliage. Examples of these are gaillardia, sundrops, hyssops (agastache), penstemons, yarrows, chocolate flower, and pincushion flower. Other plants like catmint need the dead

foliage cut back to the green/gray leaves. Catch catmint early because the stems are easier to prune off when the new growth is closer to the ground.

Prairie sage – you can run a lawn mower over it, but watch out for the seed heads which you may need to take off first. I use a hedge trimmer after cutting off the biggest seed heads. Also, be careful with the seed heads of liatris and purple prairie clover as they're great reseederers. These both need to be cut near the ground. And I love Giant Four O'Clock because the stems and leaves dry after first frost and sometime during the winter the dead foliage just blows away.

Ornamental grasses

Grasses should be cut close to the ground and then jabbed with an awl or large screwdriver. Grasses come back from the roots and the blade part above ground is dead. What you're trying to do is open up some space for new blades to grow through. I don't cut my grasses until I see some green coming up. The time obviously varies by whether it's a cold season or warm season grass. Sometimes I have to cut my meadow early (with a weed wacker) so I can see my spring bulbs come up. If I wait too late, the bulb foliage gets cut off. There are a few varieties of grass that don't like to be cut. For these I "comb" the grass with a rake.

Fertilization

If a plant grows natively in an environment that has better soil than yours, then you'll need to provide nutrition in the spring. My favorite fertilizer is compost, used as mulch around the plant, and watered in slightly. For acid soil loving non-native plants you'll need to add an iron product like Miller's Ferrous Plus with a little natural sulfur and wash it in a little or it'll blow away. Grasses need to be fertilized when they're growing. For cool season grasses this is early spring and fall, for warm season grasses it's May or August. If a plant needs nitrogen, an element our soil lacks, you can poke horse alfalfa pellets in vertically around the plant.

Mulch

The last task on my list is to add organic mulch if it's thinned or old looking on the ground. I may add to the gravel mulch as well. I do these tasks in the spring because I feel more plants have difficulty getting through our summers than our winters.

Training

If you'd like to learn more – with some "hands on" experience – just e-mail me. I can always use the help!