

# What's Wrong with Cone, Box, and Ball Pruning?

It's difficult to find a commercial landscape in Albuquerque that isn't pruning shrubs using hedge trimmers into geometric shapes, so why do I consider this "bad practice"? For me the primary reason is because it destroys the natural shape of the plant, but there are other less aesthetic reasons as well.

It may surprise you to know that plants don't require much pruning in nature – annual pruning is a usually a waste of your money. If a plant doesn't need a branch, regardless of the cause, it will drop the branch and seal off the break point. Often lower branches are dropped because they get shaded out as the shrub grows and the branch is no longer needed to make food for the plant. When a shrub drops a lower branch it usually retains its original shape, whether that is fountain shaped like forsythia, tall and vertical like some junipers, or vase shaped like Rose of Sharon. It doesn't hurt however, to look over each shrub annually to see if there's dead wood or crossing/rubbing branches and to confirm the shrub has no pests or diseases.

The most expensive component of landscape pricing is labor. The more times a crew comes to maintain your landscape and the longer it takes them, the more you pay. What can you do to reduce either the number of visits or the time per visit? You can start with a good design. That is one where the plants at maturity fit the space where they're located so they don't need to be sheared to fit a space. You can also choose plants that need less pruning to look natural. The growth habit of a plant and how easy it will be to maintain should be foremost in the designer's mind. Also, the tendency to overplant landscapes to make them look good on day one but means too many plants are installed in the space. That creates the beginning of a landscape problem. If plants didn't grow, the design would be maintained – but plants do grow - into each other, over the sidewalk, curb, and wall. Maintenance begins with a well thought out design. Sometimes the first step to a better-looking landscape is to remove some plants.

Unfortunately, the first time a shrub is pruned to a geometric shape it looks good – neat and controlled. This appeals to many homeowners, especially those that like neatness. But it becomes unsustainable over time. A cut branch, if not done at a V point, will generate wild looking regrowth from the stub necessitating another visit to keep it pruned to the geometric shape. That regrowth from the cut point is weaker growth. To keep green foliage showing the next time the shrub is sheared the shearer will need to move out a bit from the previous cut so now we have more branching which grows both faster and stubbier/thicker each time it's cut. It forms an outer shell and the shrub gets bigger so if it's being sheared to fit a space, the shearer will need to cut deeper into the shrub to make it fit. With a denser shell the interior leaves are being shaded out and now cutting into the plant brings up a "dead zone". Shearing becomes a continuous cycle of maintenance. The shrubs only look good just after a shearing.

Shearing which is the same as removing leaves from a shrub (or tree) takes away part of the food factory and stresses the plant. Imagine someone cutting off your arm to make you look more vertical! Stress makes the plant more susceptible to pests and diseases. The energy needed to regrow leaves to make food keeps the plant from using that same energy to build up immunity to disease or to fight off pests.

Over time the shrub declines more quickly and doesn't look healthy. Shearing also causes cut stems and leaves to fall inside the plant which can help pests overwinter.

If the shrub flowers in the spring, constant shearing results in a lack of bloom – the new growth where flowers bloom gets sheared off. The landscape design changes from a mixture of colored leaves, flowers, textures, and natural shapes to one of green geometric shapes. The same is true for plants with color tipped leaves – constant shearing removes the color. Everything becomes green.

Ecologically, constant shearing generates more green waste which requires more labor and cost to take the waste to a dump site. The plant also uses more water because it's constantly trying to regrow the leaves that were cut off.

A well pruned shrub doesn't look like it's been pruned. It uses a method called natural or selective pruning. This method is better watched with a video than described in words and I recommend you search using the following keywords: "selective pruning" "Jeff Wortham" video. Using selective pruning may take more time initially, but you won't be returning very often so it is sustainable, cheaper in the long run, and less damaging to the shrub. The shrub will look better and live longer. There are also videos about rejuvenating sheared plants. Rejuvenation takes more time and you may have to go through an ugly stage before the plants regain their natural shape. Some plants will never regain their natural shape.

With this article I'm hoping you'll become a more discerning buyer of landscape services and that we can all make a difference for a more beautiful landscape.