



Harper's

The Lost Art of Pruning Urban Landscape Ornamentals

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Pruning is the science and art of removing a part or parts of a plant by man for a specific purpose

(Grounds, 1973). Pruning should be performed to;

- 1) train a plant,
- 2) maintain plant health and vigor,
- 3) obtain a balance between vegetative growth and flowering,
- 4) improve the quality of flowers, fruit, foliage, stems, etc., or
- 5) limit growth.

Knowing how and when to prune ornamental shrubs and trees requires a working knowledge of plant characteristics, such as growth habit, height at maturity, and flowering time. Unfortunately, much of today's pruning in urban areas involve individuals brandishing about the landscape, power hedge trimmers in hand, sculpturing

shrubs and trees into shapes resembling grocery boxes, lollipops, warts, bricks, and giant doorknobs. Such shapes do not rate as even the worst of topiaries. They are hand-crafted out of convenience, or in the name of business efficiency, with little regard to the plant's aesthetic qualities.

Tasteful pruning begins with the selection and planting of healthy, vigorous plants, which at maturity will be in proper proportion to their landscape environment. A shrub or tree that is in proportion to its surroundings will not become an embarrassment over time, or require frequent pruning to keep it within bounds. For example, some of the more obnoxious pruning attempts in central Arizona landscapes stem from the crowding of cassias and Texas rangers into narrow street mediums (I call these landscape doorknobs and sea polyps), the planting *Acacia redolens* everywhere but the widest freeway embankments (I call these acacia fudge bars), or overgrown Pfitzer junipers in small planter beds (I just call these bricks).

Except for the creation of formalized hedges, special effects or topiaries, or severe renewal pruning, a good prun-

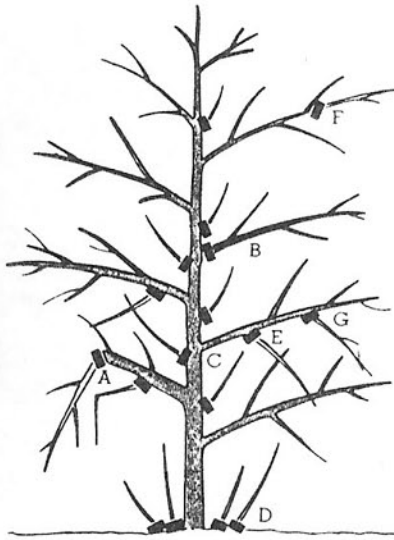
ing job will preserve a semblance of a plant's natural shape. Often the layperson cannot even tell that a pruning has occurred. One rule-of-thumb which may help horticulturists maximize the flowering potential of woody ornamentals in the landscape is called the "May Rule." The "May Rule" is based on whether a plant flowers on new or old wood. In simple terms, if a plant flowers after May, then it is flowering on new wood and should be pruned early in the year, preferably during winter or early spring. If a plant flowers before May, then it is flowering on old wood and should be pruned after the blooming period. Thus, shrubs like cassia, Indian hawthorne, and acacia, which flower on old wood, should be pruned only after bloom. Whereas, shrubs like Texas ranger, red bird-of-paradise, or lilac chaste tree which flower on new wood, can be pruned during the winter. Oleander is one exception to this rule because it flowers on both old and new wood, and thus can be pruned most any time.

Urban landscape spaces have become increasingly smaller. This trend show no sign of reversing itself any time soon. Also, many of our Southwestern ornamentals like *Cercidium*, *Prosopis*, and *Acacia* have growth habits that are generally widespreading. These characteristics promote survival in their native open, arid woodlands; however, these characteristics make these plants generally ill-prepared for use in our urban landscapes without extensive structural training. Screening and selecting ornamental plants, particularly cultivars and varieties of leguminous landscape trees, which have a more erect, upright growth habit is essential to lessen the demand for frequent structural pruning.

Pruning is becoming increasingly a lost horticultural art form. Our power tools-of-convenience do much to promote today's landscape maintenance do-it-real-fast-and-efficient mentality. However, pruning can be fun. Pruning can be relaxing. Our horticulture industry should do more to promote the potential leisure and therapeutic aspects of pruning, along with gardening in general. Exercising good pruning habits will bear Southwestern flowers and fruit for many years. ■

Literature Cited. Grounds, R. 1973. *The Complete Handbook of Pruning*. MacMillan Publishing Co. New York, 157 pp.

PRUNING TECHNIQUES



Subjects for pruning: (A) broken branches, (B) dead limbs, (C) water-sprouts, (D) suckers, (E) crossing branches, (F) long, awkward limbs, (G) dangling branches.



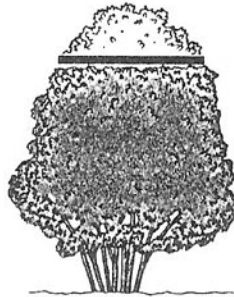
Pinching



Thinning



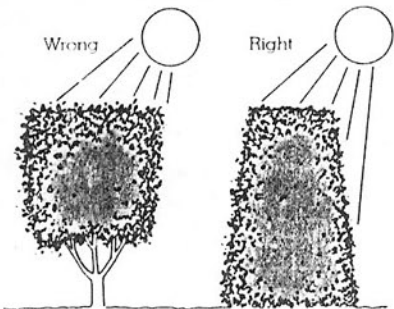
Heading back



Shearing



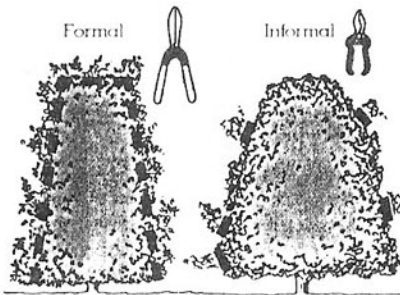
Prune to change direction of growth. (A) Cut spreading plant to upright limbs for increased height. (B) Cut off upright limbs to encourage spreading.



Top-heavy, leafless at base

Dense growth from top to bottom

Taper hedge sides so that bottom is wider than top (right). Lower leaves, stems die without adequate light.

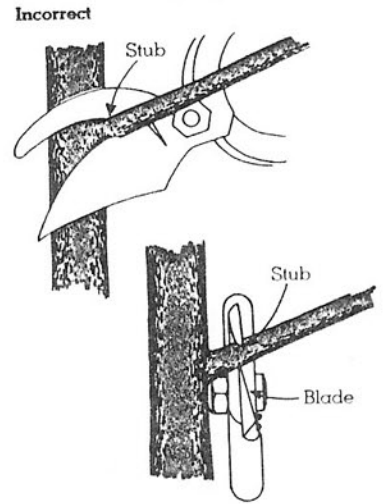
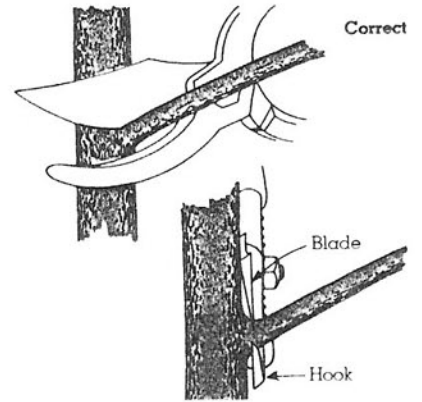


Shear both sides and top

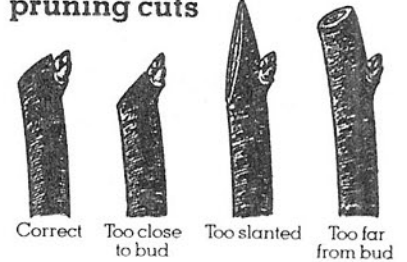
Selectively cut back shoots

Formal trimming (left)—use shears to form flat sides, top. Informal trimming—snip back wayward shoots.

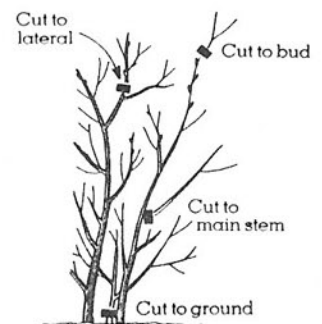
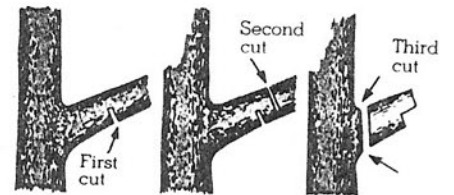
How to position pruning shears



Right and wrong pruning cuts



Removing large limbs



Where to make cuts