

## Pruning Evergreen Shrubs

### Pruning Broad-leaved Evergreen Shrubs

Most broad-leaved evergreens, such as rhododendrons (including azalea), andromeda, evergreen barberry, and holly, require limited amounts of pruning on a very selective basis. This could be undertaken to improve or enhance the natural habit of the bush and/or to keep it in scale with its surroundings. In addition, such pruning promotes fuller new growth from within the crown. Generally, this work can be done whenever convenient for the gardener. For the least sacrifice of bloom, prune shortly after flowering but before the next year's flower buds are set in July. Cut back any out-of-place branches to a **lateral** or, if **heading back** a young vigorous cane, be sure to cut above a few remaining leaves.

Tradition states that '**deadheading**' or removing spent flowers is the one pruning procedure to be practiced annually with **truss**-forming broad-leaved evergreens such as rhododendron and mountain laurel. Experts differ on the importance of this chore. Some claim that seed capsules allowed to develop do not appreciably affect flower and shoot development for the coming year ("It doesn't occur in nature!"). Others feel that if time permits, deadheading will result in a fuller shrub with better quality blooms.

If you do plan to deadhead, simply snap out the faded flower truss with your fingers, while holding the branch with your other hand. This must be accomplished as soon as the flowers begin to fade. Use care to avoid damaging the vegetative buds or new shoots that form directly below the flower heads. (See drawing at right).

### Rejuvenation

Broad-leaved evergreens sometimes get too large and/or leggy for their location. All healthy broad-

### Glossary

**Adventitious buds**--growth buds that appear in locations where they are not ordinarily expected; usually appear after an injury or pruning.

**Candle**--the new elongating growth on pines.

**Deadheading**--removing the spent flowers or unripe seed pods from a plant such as a rhododendron.

**Heading back**--cutting back stems on a shrub, hedge, or vine to the point of attachment of another outward-facing branch or bud.

**Latent bud**--a bud that does not develop (open) in the season it was formed.

**Lateral**--a branch attached to and subordinate to a scaffold branch.

**Rejuvenation**--pruning undertaken to restore overgrown shrubs to their former vigor and/or size.

**Truss**--a flower cluster, usually growing at the terminal of a stem or branch (e.g., rhododendron).



Deadheading rhododendron--proper care and timing must be exercised in the removal process. Here the trusses are being removed just as the flowers fade. Caution must be used in snapping-off each truss so that the small, partially-hidden growth buds are not damaged. Drawing to the right shows growth one year after deadheading.

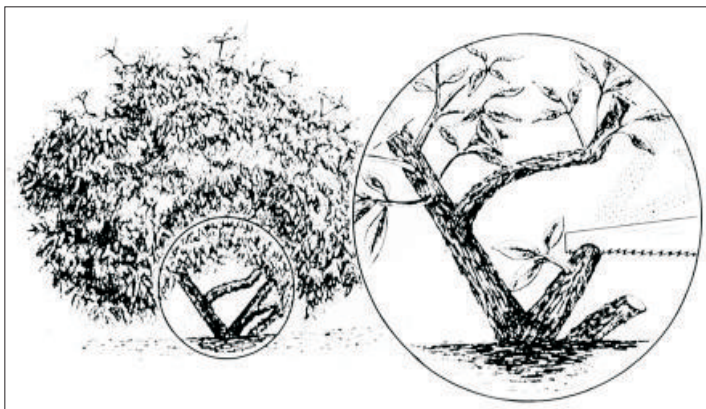
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leaved evergreen shrubs can be successfully rejuvenated if the procedure is carried out in late winter or early spring before growth begins. This may be considered drastic pruning by the novice gardener, but it is perfectly acceptable in the appropriate circumstances. A similar action occurs in nature when fire destroys the tops of rhododendrons or mountain laurel, and new shoots arise from the base to form a new compact plant.

Different techniques in rejuvenating broad-leaved evergreens are possible:

- 1) Sever at the base of the crown; full rejuvenation will take 2-4 years.
- 2) For multi-stemmed plants, completely remove a few of the oldest trunks each year for a period of 2-3 years. This approach works very well for *Leucothoe*, evergreen azaleas, and barberry.
- 3) Overgrown shrubs that may require some height reduction into bare, leafless wood can be pruned at varying heights of 2-4 feet from the ground. This form of rejuvenation must be done in early spring and all at one time. By cutting at varying heights, the developing vegetative shoots will not appear uniform. The plant will then re-establish its natural habit of growth.



This line drawing shows a mountain laurel that will be cut back into leafless wood. Note in the insert, the new shoots have appeared during the first season.

Special care is important for any plant that has been drastically pruned. If rejuvenation is the anticipated goal, fertilize the plant in question the fall prior to spring pruning. Otherwise, make the application immediately following pruning. The ability of the plant to produce ample new and healthy growth hinges on this and other proper horticultural procedures: watering, mulching, and insect and disease control.

In many landscapes, situations may exist where a tightly sheared, geometric shrub is desired. Because of their thicket-type growth, this type of treatment is often considered for evergreen azaleas. Although they will usually respond to such pruning because **latent buds** exist far along the branches, this technique is better used on other evergreens. Azaleas naturally exhibit an attractive growth habit that should not be mutilated. When tightly sheared, flowers appear only at the branch tips.

*Pyracantha*, or firethorn, is an exception to the pruning procedures described above in that it requires a greater degree and frequency of pruning to avoid becoming an unmanageable size. Determining the best time for annual pruning is difficult since the next year's flowers (and fruit) are produced on the previous season's wood. If too much wood is removed each year, the plant will be left with few of the colorful fruit so essential to the beauty of this shrub. In late winter or early spring, select for removal only those branches most out of scale. This will allow enough of the previous season's growth to remain to assure adequate flowering. If the plant is excessively overgrown, there is little choice but to rejuvenate in late winter or early spring. Since this practice will eliminate nearly all flowers for the next spring, it is more desirable to prune selectively each year, rather than heavily every several years.

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### Pruning Narrow-leaved Evergreen Shrubs

Of foremost importance with narrow-leaved evergreen plants is knowing what you have or intend to purchase. Far too many narrow-leaved evergreens initially look like shrubs but quickly outgrow their surroundings, ultimately becoming trees! Hemlock and certain *Chamaecyparis*, juniper, and arborvitae species are not meant for foundation planting. Use of hedge shears will prove futile in any attempt to keep them in bounds. Though not readily apparent, sheared shrubs continue to enlarge in size. With repeated tight shearing, very dense needle growth develops at the tips, decreasing light penetration to the inner part of the plant. This results in excessive inner needle drop and hinders natural renewal growth from within the plant.

Maintenance pruning is done to enhance the natural form and habit of the plant, and to keep its growth controlled and open for good light penetration. Timing of selective pruning is less critical for coniferous evergreens because they are not included in the landscape for their flowering ability. Whether they are pruned in early spring before growth commences, or during the winter holidays for decorative use of 'greens' or as a winter mulch, makes little difference. A second light thinning and heading back of new growth should be performed in late June to early July.

Thinning is generally done every year to prevent a plant from getting overly large. On Japanese yews, junipers, and other spreading evergreens, it involves the pruning of longer, out-of-scale branches to a point back within the plant either to an inner lateral or to just above vigorous side shoots on the two- or three-year-old wood. Start the process at the top and work down, removing those branches that extend out and over lower shorter ones below. This allows the lower branches proper exposure to light. Do not cut back all branches to the same length; otherwise the intended

natural habit of the plant will be destroyed. By making pruning cuts so that they are hidden by part of an overlapping branch, there will be no indication that the shrub was pruned. Remember to keep the diameter of the top of the plant smaller than that of the base.

Ground-cover type conifers, like creeping junipers, may also require trimming near a walk, border, or edging. Do not shear, but cut back branches at varying distances to preserve the natural look.



Recommended pruning of spreading narrow-leaved evergreens.

Mugo pine is generally considered a dwarf conifer, but still may require annual pruning to keep its compact form. This is accomplished by nipping the new **candles** back by about 50 percent when the shoots have fully elongated and are still soft.

### Rejuvenation

Most narrow-leaved evergreens do not have **adventitious buds** on old wood, as do the broad-leaved forms. Thus, mature overgrown plants of *Chamaecyparis*, juniper, hemlock, and others cannot be topped or cut back into old needle-less wood without mutilating them. The voids caused by heavy interior pruning will not be filled in by new growth. Once these plants become too large for their existing location, it's best to remove them, or possibly, prune up

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the lower branches, allowing the plant to develop an open, multi-trunked tree form.

There are, however, a few exceptions to the above rule. *Taxus* (yews) and, in some instances, arborvitae have the ability to initiate new growth from old woody inner branches. These plants can be cut back severely into needle-less wood and will rejuvenate new growth. As mentioned earlier under broad-leaved evergreens, this procedure must be done in early spring and to healthy plants. Prune branches back to irregular heights so that the result is a return of the plant to a natural growth habit.



This line drawing shows a *Taxus* that was cut back to bare inner wood. The insert, one year later, depicts the many new shoots that emerged from the area near the cut branch tips.

### Seasonal Pruning Calendar

#### EARLY SPRING: just before bud break

- Head back growth of random-branched conifer species: junipers, *Chamaecyparis* (false cypress), yews, and *Thuja* (arborvitae).
- Preferred time to rejuvenate evergreen and deciduous shrubs and hedges that are out-of-bounds.

#### SPRING: bud break

- Best not to prune any woody plants at this time due to translocation of carbohydrates and growth hormones to growing points.

#### SPRING/EARLY SUMMER; leaves fully expanded

- For more compact growth, pinch out one-half of the new growth of pines, spruces, and firs.
- Clip back the terminals of vigorous new shoots as well as spent flowers in ericaceous species (*Rhododendron*, azaleas, mountain laurel, *Andromeda*); this will keep plants compact and encourage production of side shoots and flower buds.
- Evergreen shrubs or hedges that were pruned heavily in late winter or early spring can be trimmed now to reestablish clean lines.

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**SUMMER:** new shoots reach full growth and start to become woody.

- Alternate time to rejuvenate hedges.

**EARLY FALL:** new shoots fully mature; early stages of fall color

- Heavy pruning at this time can result in stimulation of new shoots that may not properly harden before winter; limit pruning to the removal of damaged or dead wood, especially on conifers.

### About the Authors:

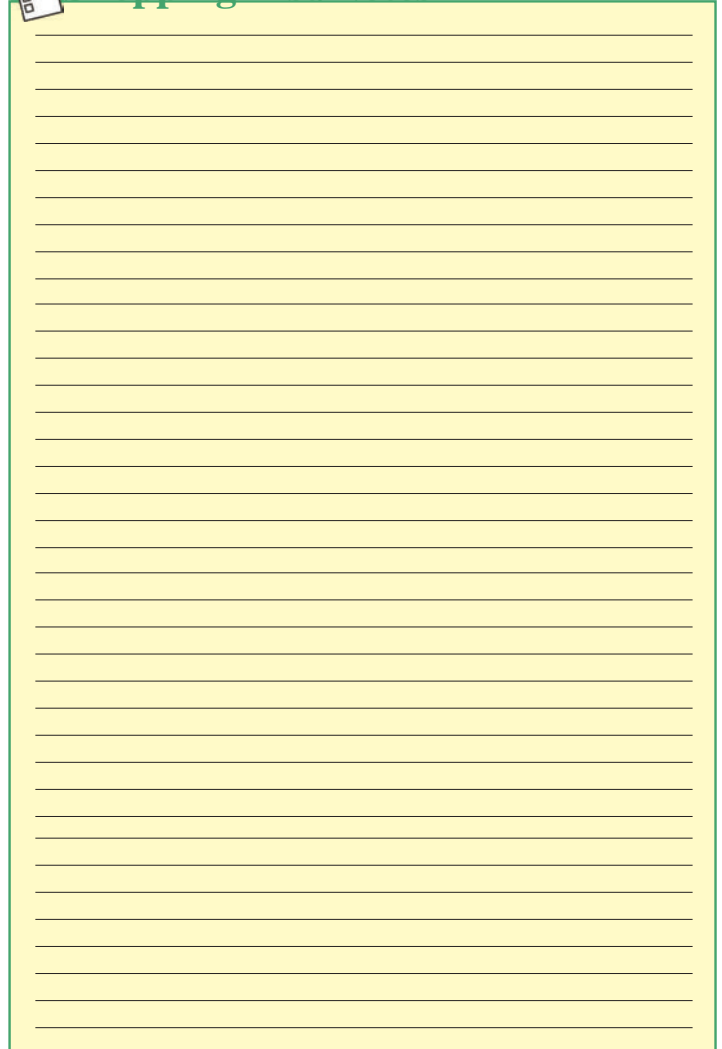
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### Shopping List/Notes



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### About Your Expert

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PlantAmerica Horticulturist Donna Moramarco (a.k.a. "Donna in the Garden") has been helping gardeners solve problems and achieve their dreams for over two decades. Donna has degrees in horticulture and education plus over 20 years as a Cornell University extension horticulturist.