

Pruning Questions and Answers

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As the promise of spring hangs in the air, gardeners across the region are gearing up for a flurry of activity, including the essential task of pruning. But with so many different plants and techniques to consider, knowing the ins and outs of proper pruning can be a daunting challenge. Here, we break down some common questions and expert advice to help you master the art of pruning.

Do you prune roses differently than when you prune climbing roses?

Climbing roses are just roses that grow very long stems. They cannot cling to structures such as trellises or posts by themselves. If growing them on a trellis, space wires 12 inches apart horizontally to the height you want them to grow. Climbing roses and other vines can get quite heavy. The wire and posts must be able to the weight of the rose. The narrowest posts I would use are 4 x 4. They also should be cemented into the ground. If you are training them onto a structure such as a pergola or an arch, as the main branch grows, twist it around the post so that the post supports it as it matures. The main stems may be slow to form side branches. If so, tip-prune them a few inches back. This will force side growth.

Prune climbing roses along the Wasatch Front in mid-March. First, remove any dead canes. Cut back by 2/3 any side branches that flowered the previous year. If primary branches are too long, cut them back to the length that suits where they are being grown. If there are too many branches, prune out 25% of them, starting with the oldest thickest ones.

2. What if you prune too much off (of a rose, tree, or shrub)? Will the plant die?

If you prune too many branches off a tree or shrub, it will not kill them unless they are already quite unhealthy. The rule is not to prune more than 25% of the canopy or branches from the tree or shrub in a given year. If you over-prune, the tree or shrub will become angry, in a sense. The roots have stored energy to support the canopy it once had, and the energy will be used to regrow the former canopy. Pruning also stimulates new growth. This combination of stored energy and pruning cuts causes excessive, uncontrolled growth that often grows at weak branch angles. The newly formed branches are called water sprouts.

3. Do you have to clean pruners between each plant?

Pruners should be cleaned for the following reasons. A primary one is that diseases can sometimes be spread by contaminated pruning equipment. If you are pruning diseased branches, you may need to sterilize the pruner blades between each cut. Another reason is that plant sap can corrode and damage the blades and metal parts. Rubbing alcohol removes pine tar. Otherwise, citrus oil soap does a good job. Once clean, lubricate the hinges and the blades with clean machine oil.

4. How sharp should your tools be?

Have them as sharp as reasonably possible. This reduces the risk of injury to you and the plant. Dull blades cause you to use more force to cut branches. When done repeatedly, this damages tissue in the remaining branch and can increase the risk of smashing your knuckles together and damaging your rotator cuffs.

5. Should I wait to prune my honeysuckle?

Prune vine honeysuckle branches back by 1/3 as soon as they are done blooming. Otherwise, to reduce their size, prune them in late winter. Remove all dead vines. After this, trim the living vines back to the needed size. The more you prune, the longer it will take for the plant to rebloom. Severely pruned plants will not bloom for 3 – 4 years after pruning.

Bush honeysuckles bloom in the spring. Prune them soon after they are done blooming. Remove 25% of the branches from inside the bush, starting with the branches with the greatest girth. After this, you can lightly hedge the bush back if needed.

6. How do I prune hydrangeas?

It will depend on the species. Bigleaf hydrangea, which often struggles in Utah, should be pruned as soon as it is done blooming in the summer. If pruned in late winter, most of the flower buds are removed. Other hydrangeas bloom off of new growth. They are pruned in the spring using the method mentioned in the honeysuckle section. Here is a factsheet with more details.

With these tips in mind, you'll be well-equipped to tackle pruning tasks with confidence. A fact sheet can be found at <https://tinyurl.com/pruningfacts>. Happy pruning!