

Fall Pruning

As the falling leaves reveal the structure of deciduous trees, many people think about getting out the pruning loppers and going to work. While a fall pruning frenzy may make things a bit more tidy, too much can kill trees and shrubs. Pruning has an invigorating effect on woody plants, so it can stimulate late growth. Late growth is more susceptible to winter injury. Even if new shoots don't develop in response to pruning cuts, cambial growth is prolonged, leading to freezing injury. Another problem with major fall pruning is that woody plants begin moving minerals and carbohydrates from the foliage into the stem and roots in the fall. If a significant part of a plant is removed, the nutrients are discarded before they can be stored. A last reason to avoid major pruning in the fall is that wounds will take longer to callus over than they do in the spring, inviting potential insect and disease infestations.

So what can you prune in the fall? It's okay to remove diseased, dead, or broken branches any time of the year. If diseased parts stay on a tree over the winter they could cause more damage. Arborists sometimes prune heavy "bleeders" like maple and birch in the fall to minimize sap loss. Removing branches that could, if laden with snow or ice, interfere with power lines or structures, justifies pruning at any time. You can also prune large, overgrown shrubs during fall and winter. Thin them, however, rather than heading them at the top. Thinning will reduce the plant's size without affecting its overall shape.

Thinning is especially important for flowering trees and shrubs. Some branches can be removed without significantly reducing spring flowering. Lilacs and forsythias, as well as most flowering trees, have already formed their flowers for next year. These flowers are encased in buds, often near the tips of the plant. That's why you should only remove dead, dying, and diseased branches at this time of year. A general rule is that plants that flower before June should be pruned after they bloom, while those that flower in the summer should be pruned prior to spring growth.

Needle evergreens, such as pine, spruce, and fir, should be allowed plenty of room to grow naturally, so that pruning is not necessary. If you must trim them, do a light shearing right after spring growth.

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