

NORTHWOODS YARD & GARDEN

Weekly Column


March 11, 2024

Pruning Landscape Shrubs

Deciduous and evergreen shrubs are popular landscape plants as they provide interest through features such as flowers, fruit, bark, foliage, and plant form. Most require pruning to keep these qualities. Exact timing varies by species, but spring is a suitable time for pruning shrubs.

There are two major types of pruning for deciduous shrubs: renewal and rejuvenation. Renewal pruning involves cutting only selected older stems to the ground. This keeps shrubs blooming on a regular basis, maintains plant size, keeps desirable colored bark, and may even help reduce pest problems. Among the species well-suited for renewal pruning are lilac, forsythia, red and yellow twig dogwood, alpine currant, and arrowwood viburnum.

Rejuvenation pruning is removing all stems to near ground level. This practice is ideal for multi-stem shrubs that have grown too large and where there are so many stems packed together renewal pruning is not a realistic option. Avoid cutting all stems only partially down. After pruning, overall shrub diameter can also be reduced by undercutting with shovel. Shrubs ideal for this practice include spirea, honeysuckle, hydrangea, potentilla, and privet.



Consider when shrubs bloom to decide exactly when to best prune them if flowers are an important feature. June 15 is the key date to consider. If a shrub blooms prior to June 15, flower buds form the previous season and dormant pruning will remove them. For this reason, spring blooming species, such as lilac, should be pruned right after they bloom, rather than when dormant.

Do deciduous shrubs need pruning every year? In most cases the answer is no. Use shrub performance and appearance as a guide. Shrubs that become one big overgrown mass of stems clearly need to be pruned. Declining flower production is a less obvious sign pruning may be needed. Shrubs with bright colored stems that become faded also signal pruning is needed.

Needle evergreen shrubs are managed a little differently. Overgrown yews or junipers can be pruned in spring. Yews may be heavily pruned back as long as a few green shoots remain on trunks and branches. With junipers, do not cut back beyond the first hint of the zone of brown needles inside; green shoots must remain. For Mugo pines, do not prune in spring. Instead, wait until we get close to summer and pinch back new candles to keep plants compact.

Inventory your shrubs over the next few weeks and make pruning plans as needed. Shrubs will respond with improved growth in 2024.

Interested in learning more about Horticulture in Iron County?
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